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ONE OF THE ORIGINALS

The Story of a Founder Member of the SAS

'L' DETACHMENT ORIGINALS 1941

S·A·S WHO DARES WINS

JOHNNY COOPER

One of the Originals

Lieutenant-Colonel John Murdoch Cooper, MBE, DCM, was born in 1922, and joined the Scots Guards in 1940 when under-age. He volunteered for the Special Air Service at its inception in 1941 and served with the SAS in North Africa and France throughout the War, returning to work alongside some of his old comrades in Malaya, after a brief interlude. In 1962 he left the Army to work for the Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces and continued to serve the Sultanate until his retirement in 1979. He has been mentioned in dispatches three times: in 1946 by King George VI; in 1959 by our Queen; and in 1970 when Buckingham Palace permitted him to receive the Sultan of Oman's Award.
He now lives in Portugal.

One of the Originals

The Story of a Founder Member of the SAS

Johnny Cooper
with Anthony Kemp

Pan Books London, Sydney and Auckland

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To: the Originals,
and especially to Reg Seekings

My thanks to Tony Kemp
for his invaluable help,
and to my wife Mildred
for typing the manuscript.

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'A sinewy major with sun blackened skin
and the features of a Greek bandit.'
Ranulph Fiennes in *Living Dangerously*

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Some of the Originals. *Back row left to right*: Rose, Austin, Seekings, Catell, Cooper; *front row*: Rhodes, Baker, Badger

Mike Sadler and David Stirling relaxing during a Western Desert patrol

Johnnie Cooper (*left*) and Reg Seekings (*right*) as newly fledged sergeants

From left to right: Seekings, Rose, Colonel Stirling and Cooper in the Blitz Buggy

Ted Badger and Johnnie Cooper taking the noon sun sight

Paddy Mayne in the desert

Group photo in Constantine. *Front row*: Freddie Taxis, Johnnie Cooper, Reg Seekings. The two French SAS men are behind

Desert version of the Jeep, modified for SAS, 1942. (Note twin Vickers K at rear, single Vickers and 0.5 Browning at front, and water condenser on front bumper). (A.Kemp collection)

above left:
Citroën used by the Maquis; FFI stands for Forces Françaises l'Interieur.

A Squadron armoured Jeeps in North Germany 1945

Author's Jeep with two crew members in a German farmyard

Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver Brooke, CO 10th Yorkshire Parachute Battalion (TA); author in right-hand background

Speakman's Hill

Crossing a river in Malaya

Corporal Lyle, Lieutenant Murray and Trooper Downing on their return from the 122-day patrol

Peter Fich, BBC, interviewing the author (*right*) in Malaya

Fort Brooke

The author (sixth from left) briefing Sir Anthony Eden in Kuala Lumpur, 1956

The Pioneer aircraft from which the author had a lucky escape

Author in Arab dress

Author on a camel in North Yemen

Author with Cyril Weavers (*centre*) and Ahmed, medical orderly

Author recently in the Morvan region of France

Left to right: Author with David Stirling and Reg Seekings at the SAS 'L' Detachment Reunion 1988. The painting depicts aircraft being blown up by SAS Jeep action.

Foreword

Colonel Sir David Stirling, founder of the SAS whose regimental motto is 'Who Dares Wins', died on 4 November 1990 – but the splendid force that was his brainchild lives on, as do the principles upon which that force was based: 'the pursuit of excellence, the maintenance of the highest standards of discipline in all aspects of daily life, and no sense of class'.

When I decided to record my experiences with the SAS, Colonel Stirling gave me warm encouragement. He said of the first draft, 'your script is first rate. Your writing method is splendidly direct and vivid and full of interesting observations . . . I do urge you to persist in writing a full length book of your life.'

It is my personal sadness that Colonel David will not be among those to receive a copy of this book, but I trust that the following pages would have met with his approval, and delight, and I dedicate my effort to all the Originals.

1 Prelude to war

When war broke out in September 1939 I was living in the Yorkshire city of Bradford, although I was born and grew up in Leicester. Both my parents were of Scottish descent, but my father was involved in the spinning of worsted yarn for the hosiery trade. He went through a financial bad patch owing to the general depression in the early thirties, but we were a happy and united family. I cannot say that I was much interested in military matters as a child, although my father had served in the Army during the First World War and was subsequently a member of the Leicestershire Yeomanry, a Territorial cavalry unit. My own leisure interests were bound up with the Scouts and I enjoyed active pursuits such as walking and cycling.

My school career was hardly a resounding success. I attended the Wyggeston Grammar School where my only real talent as a youngster was a moderately good treble voice, which brought me into contact with Richard Attenborough. At that time, Dickie was a regular performer on the Midland Region of the BBC as a boy soprano, and was considered to be quite the hero of the school in this sphere. We both took part in a rather amateurish production of *Robin Hood*, he as Maid Marian and myself, as the taller, as Robin. We both took part in many of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas produced by the school and at one stage were cast as fairies. Nature, however, took its course and our voices began to break.

Our respective parents, under the assumption that

we had musical talents, then coerced us into taking up the violin. Our instructor was a gentleman by the name of Silvester who was indeed related to the famous Victor, and in his own right was a first violinist with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Dickie Attenborough and I managed to attain the dizzy heights of second violins in the school orchestra, but were placed well to the back, obviously to make certain that any bum notes would be obliterated by the rest of the musicians in front of us.

My efforts to pass matriculation examinations ended in dismal failure, and my father banished me to Yorkshire at the tender age of sixteen, where I was apprenticed to Messrs Vickers and Wheelers in Bradford. This was known in the trade as 'belly t'board' which entailed sorting the greasy wool into its many different categories, most of which had originated from Australia, New Zealand or South America.

For this I was paid the handsome wage of eleven shillings and twopence a week, and on which I lived like a lord in comparison to my schoolboy's pocket money of threepence per week. My lodgings at a small commercial hotel in Manningham Lane were subsidized by my father, which eased the financial burden. The majority of the inmates of this fine establishment were New Zealanders and Australians, over in the home country to learn the wool trade from the Yorkshire end. Many were the sons of wealthy farmers and breeders, and all of them were four or five years older than myself. They did, however, take me under their wing, and on many occasions I accompanied them to the local pub, the Spotted Dog, where I consumed vast quantities of lemonade alongside their pints of Tetley's bitter. Owing to my rather tall stature and being surrounded by that crowd of exuberant 'colonials', the landlord overlooked my age.

In August 1939 I travelled with my sister to Chamonix where I spent my time mountaineering, and while travelling through Paris on our return journey we heard that

war had been declared. The Métro was crowded with French reservists hastening to join their units, and our ferry from Calais was escorted by a destroyer. When I got back to Bradford I discovered that my older Commonwealth friends had flocked to the various recruiting offices in Bradford and Leeds, many of them joining the Royal Air Force. At the time I was just seventeen years old and the minimum age for volunteering was twenty, but this did not deter me from trying to join up. I went off to the various recruiting offices in Leeds but got sent away on account of my age.

The next few months were frustrating as I carried on my apprenticeship and followed the war news, which had anyway settled into stalemate. I had not abandoned my desire to get into uniform but became resigned to waiting until I was of a suitable age. But then fate intervened in the person of an older lodger at the hotel. He assured me that the easiest way to overcome the problem was to take two half-crowns in my hand and approach a certain recruiting sergeant in Bradford, who would view my application favourably. At the same time, another fellow lodger, Jack Savage, was adamant that he was going to join the Scots Guards, as his father had served in that famous regiment. We discussed my Scottish background and decided that we would both apply to the recruiting office in Forster Square, Bradford, naming the Scots Guards as our first choice.

We duly presented ourselves and the sergeant questioned me about my Scottish ancestry. I mentioned my Murdoch connection and at the same time slipped the two half-crowns into the sergeant's hand. A smile flickered across his face and he commented: 'You look a likely lad to guard the Royal Family.' Both Jack and I were rushed before the medical officer who, after examining us both, accepted me as being one hundred per cent fit. Poor Jack, alas, was turned down on account of flat feet, but I heard later that he had managed to get into the Catering Corps. Back at our lodging, Jack was

full of chagrin at having failed on medical grounds, and commenced to tell me at great length how his father had described life at the Scots Guards Depot at Caterham. I was quite horrified by what I heard but, at the time, considered that most of it was a deliberate exaggeration on account of his pique at having been rejected.

The following day, 2 April 1940, I reported back to the recruiting office where I was given a rail warrant and orders to report to Caterham for enlistment. I was two and a half months short of my eighteenth birthday. Dressed in my Sunday suit and best shoes, a fact that I was to deeply regret during the following few days, I arrived at the Depot and within minutes was issued with a scrubbing brush and a cake of yellow soap. Together with thirty-five other reluctant heroes I was then doubled to a barrack block by a corporal, who constantly harangued us in a language that I had never heard before. Every second word began with an 'f', and we were compared unfavourably with the private parts of several members of the animal kingdom. His descriptive powers were colourful, to say the least. Once we had been hustled inside he yelled at us: 'Get down on your hands and knees and scrub this bloody floor until it's snow white. I will be back to inspect in three hours.' This arduous task occupied us until the evening meal which was solemnly thrown at us, and bore no relationship to any food which my mother or even the hotel in Bradford had ever produced. Then, we were doubled across to a store where we were each issued with an iron bedstead, three horsehair pallets as hard as cement, two thin blankets and a pillow. Staggering under the weight, we got back to our barrack room where we all collapsed in complete exhaustion, some of us not even bothering to use the beds.

At six the following morning we were awakened by bagpipes being played under our window in the customary Scots Guards reveille. On getting up I examined my Sunday suit and was appalled at the state into which it had already degenerated. The knees were shiny

with caked soap and what was once a fine piece of English suiting had become crumpled almost beyond recognition. Breakfast came next. Cold porridge with salt applied and no trace of milk or sugar. The NCO in charge of us herded us before the officer responsible for the recruit intake, who informed us lucky lads that we were to be transferred to Chelsea Barracks in London which was being used as an overflow training depot for both the Scots and Coldstream Guards.

On arrival by coach at Chelsea we were introduced to our squad NCO, a certain Corporal Thornthwaite, who had a deep Yorkshire accent. He was in his late forties, straight as a poker and bristling with a blond moustache under fierce blue eyes. Later I was to discover that he was a reserve Guardsman who had been called up from the police force at the outbreak of war. On interviewing us one by one to take down our personal details, he said to me: 'Aren't you a little young for the Scots Guards?' I replied that I was only just twenty, to which he retorted that he didn't believe that I was a day over sixteen, but I was not to worry about it. His only concern was to find out if I had informed my father and, if not, he impressed on me that I should do so as soon as possible. As a result I telephoned home and said: 'Dad, I am in London, at Chelsea Barracks, and I have joined the Scots Guards.' There was a pregnant silence on the other end of the line and then my father, pointing out that I was underage, threatened to inform the authorities and have me discharged. I replied to the effect that if he did so I would never speak to him again, and in the end he wished me well, saying: 'Be it on your own head, but look after yourself.'

To put it mildly the next few days were hectic, spent in drawing uniform, equipment, medical checks, and having a conducted tour of the barracks that were to be our virtual prison for the next two months. The clothing was thrown at us regardless of size by sadistic storemen who obviously took great delight in our

appearance when we tried things on. Complaints were disdainfully disregarded as we staggered out weighed down by hairy battledress and greatcoats, iron-hard new boots, stiff webbing, brushes blanco, brushes polish for the application of, sticks button, all described in Army stores jargon. The visit to the medical officer was quite perfunctory and consisted of his checking that we could actually breathe, see, and didn't have body lice. One highlight was the drawing of our own personal rifle, the old short model Lee Enfield (SMLE) from the First World War, mine being dated 1913 but still in beautiful condition. Our instructor told us that we would become 'married' to what he described as 'our third arm'.

The parade ground at Chelsea Barracks was enormous, stretching right across the whole length of the main block, and in those days was dominated by Regimental Sergeant-Major Freddie Archer, MM. He had served during the First World War, and it was unclear as to how he had managed to get into the Guards as he was only five feet eight and a half inches tall. To him the parade ground was sacred, and at weekends one could see the RSM walking across it pushing a pram, his wife in close attendance behind him, moving in the solemn precision of a slow march. Often when drilling we would see him talking to the adjutant two hundred yards away while we were marching away from him. But, just as we were about to collide with the wall at the far end, he would excuse himself to the adjutant and bellow out the order to 'about turn', and always on the correct foot. We only discovered later that he managed this miraculous feat by keeping in step with the company using his right hand to beat time on the seam of his trousers, his fingers like a pendulum indicating left and right.

Within our squad of thirty-seven, I was the only Anglo-Scot. The bed on my left was occupied by a very tough Ayrshire miner, and that on my right by a bank clerk from Glasgow. I could hardly understand a word the miner said and had to use the bank clerk

as an interpreter. However, all of them helped me in every possible way as I was by far the youngest both in age and experience. All knew that I was under-age, but Corporal Thornthwaite rather fathered me along. The Guards Depot was certainly the greatest shock of my life; I had simply had no idea that people could be treated as we were. On one occasion, we were behind the chapel being marched up and down with bayonets fixed, when one of the squad fell down gashing himself rather badly on the cheek. He was just left to lie there bleeding profusely as we marched repeatedly over him. But still, it all had its purpose to toughen us for battle.

When the day came for us to 'walk out' for the first time, the prospect of a few hours in the outside world of London filled us all with joy. We diligently blancoed our webbing, polished our brasses and bulled our boots until they gleamed. Bulling boots involved the messy business of applying a mixture of spittle and polish to the toe caps, burning it in with a candle and then applying plenty of elbow grease with a duster to bring out the sheen of the leather. When I was finally ready I believed that I was fit to stand guard at Buckingham Palace. But alas, as I reached the guardroom eight weeks after my arrival, I was inspected by the Corporal of the Guard.

'Return to your barrack room, guardsman,' he barked. 'You are a disgrace to the regiment, and in no way can you walk out into the streets of London in that filthy state.'

I duly slunk back to the barrack room where our trained soldier, Guardsman Kiernon, collected all my blancoed equipment and sparkling brass and threw it into the coal scuttle, remarking that perhaps I would be clean enough to walk out the following week. I felt that I wanted to cry. Everything that I had endured seemed pointless, exposed to the petty chicanery of the Guards system. The whole procedure was geared to breaking us and making us more frightened of being put on a charge

than being killed in action. I shall never forget the ordeal of the Guards Depot.

While all this was going on, the British Expeditionary Force had been evacuated from the beaches at Dunkirk, and Britain was left alone to face the might of the victorious German Army. Our squad duly passed out, not exactly with flying colours, but the needs of war encouraged a quick departure to the training battalion at Pirbright in Surrey. There I was posted to a training company and buckled down to learning the basics of soldiering: tactics, fieldcraft, shooting, digging trenches and all the other chores of the infantryman. A highlight was the fact that I was lucky enough to win the company's rifle shooting competition and was presented with a medal to prove my expertise with the Lee Enfield.

Shortly after Dunkirk, news was posted on the company notice board about the formation of an irregular type of unit to be known as a Commando, a name derived from similar units during the Boer War. The notice stated that all those who wished to volunteer should hand in their names to the orderly room and be prepared to be interviewed. A few weeks later a list of names, mine included, was posted on the board, stating that we would be interviewed by Major D. Daley of the Scots Guards on the following Monday. One by one we were marched in front of the major. When my turn came I was far from confident and became quite terrified when I saw him. He was most impressive, squarely built, broad in the shoulders and with a delightfully broken nose, an obvious legacy from his boxing activities.

'Well, Guardsman Cooper,' he began. 'You are a bit young for this operation, but what can you do?'

'Sir, I am a fair shot with a rifle, I have obtained the King's Scout Medal in the 9th Leicester troop and finished as a Rover in the 56th.'

'Oh,' he replied, 'then you're keen on the outdoor life?' assuming this, I imagined, from my scouting record. 'How fit are you? Do you drink? Do you smoke?'

'I'm a teetotaller, sir, and I have never smoked,' I said truthfully.

'Well, we'll give you a chance, but I still think that you are far too young. March him out, Sergeant-Major.'

Although I thought that my chances were slim, I was indeed on the threshold of my career with the SAS.

Fifty volunteers from the Scots Guards were accepted, to form No. 3 troop of 8 Guards Commando, which assembled in the autumn of 1940 around the town of Largs in Ayrshire, where we were billeted in private accommodation. The Commando was formed by Colonel R.E. 'Bob' Laycock, taking in detachments from all the various regiments of Household troops. Our troop was commanded by Major Daley and my actual section commander was a certain Lieutenant David Stirling. He had arrived from the 8th Battalion Scots Guards, which had been recruited mainly from officers with skiing experience. When the Germans invaded France in March 1940, they had been training in Chamonix for an eventual expedition to assist the Finns in their war with the Russians.

Stirling came from an ancient Scottish family with a long association with the Scots Guards, yet he was different from the officers I had come into contact with up to that time. This quietly spoken young lieutenant commanded far more respect and confidence, with his ability to put soldiers at their ease and his willingness to help. He did not bark orders; he asked people to do things. He was immensely tall, six feet five inches, which, like many tall men, he attempted to disguise with a slight stoop. Later, when I got to know him well, I discovered that he had been to Ampleforth and Trinity College, Cambridge, although scholarship had never been his strong point. Before the war his main ambition had been to be the first to climb Mount Everest. This was the beginning of an association which has continued to the present day.

We immediately got started on an intensive programme of training, and soon we were sent off to

the remote island of Arran in the Firth of Clyde. There we were introduced to special weapons, such as the Thompson sub-machine-gun, not normally encountered by infantry soldiers, and were given instruction in demolition. Our troop was spread across the Scottish countryside and my section was billeted with a delightful family whose house was on the steep slopes of Goat Fell, a mountain almost 3,000 feet high in the northern part of the island. Lengthy marches with heavy packs and the raw climate toughened us, but the training also emphasized self-reliance and personal discipline. Life in the commandos was a world apart from the barrack square in London, but we were still not allowed to forget that we were Guardsmen. It seemed to us that the whole area was one vast training camp, a sure sign that, in spite of the tragedy of Dunkirk, Britain was not beaten and intended to fight back.

Through that winter of 1940, the basic routine of marching and weapon instruction was replaced by training to get ashore from landing craft using live ammunition. A large force of commandos had been assembled, but all we knew was that we were destined for service overseas.

Early in 1941, a composite unit known as Layforce was formed, under the overall command of Bob Laycock, for service in the Middle East. It was made up of three Commandos, 7 and 8 Guards and 11 Scottish, to be transported in three ships of the Glen Line *Glen Gyle*, *Glen Erne* and *Glen Roy*, fast modern merchant vessels. The flotilla assembled off the Isle of Arran together with the cruiser *Glasgow* and several destroyers which were to act as escorts for a large convoy heading for the United States. The Glen Line ships, because of their speed, were to serve as auxiliary escorts. Shortly after setting sail we joined the convoy in the Firth of Clyde, heading then between the Mull of Kintyre and Ireland out into the Atlantic.

Almost immediately we were assailed by a ferocious

storm which was to last for three frightful days. Our living conditions were abysmal as we were billeted in the holds, vast caverns with no portholes and no source of fresh air from the decks above. We slept in hammocks slung from hooks welded to the sides of the hold and the toilet facilities, which the sailors persisted in calling the 'heads', consisted of long open troughs of open sea water covered by planks with holes bored in them. These frequently overflowed onto the deck with extremely unpleasant consequences. In order to escape the odour of excrement and vomit below, I volunteered for anti-aircraft duties on deck. Although it was extremely cold and wet, with no proper protective clothing, the fresh air was worth the discomfort.

This did not last long, however, as I was approached by Sergeant Bond (later Commander Bond of Scotland Yard), who said: 'Lad, we want you in the Sergeants' Mess as a waiter. Report there tomorrow morning to serve breakfast.' This I did, finding their living conditions not quite as primitive as ours, although still appalling by present day standards. The choice of breakfast was not ideal for the conditions: tinned pilchards in tomato sauce! Of those sergeants not too sick to attend, many took one look at the fare and disappeared at speed. To be honest, I was not far behind them. The further we progressed out into the Atlantic, however, the better the weather became and we settled into the routine of doing guard duty, cleaning the ship and training on deck.

We stayed with the convoy until we entered American territorial waters and then set off back across the Atlantic, bound for Freetown in Sierra Leone to take on fuel and water for the voyage to our still unknown destination. On arrival we were allowed ashore in small groups. Those left on board were entertained by the numerous bum-boats which buzzed around the big ships like flies, selling various trinkets and fresh fruit. The latter was a welcome treat and I made the mistake of purchasing some oranges which I consumed with relish.

But alas, two days out from Freetown bound for Cape Town, I developed an acute attack of gastroenteritis which then deteriorated into amoebic dysentery. I collapsed on the mess deck and was carried off to the ship's hospital where the ward was full of men suffering from the same complaint. The movements of my empty bowels took place every five or six minutes and for the first two days I was in agony. To make matters worse I discovered that the sailor in the next bunk to me had died of the disease.

I was lucky, however. By the time we reached Cape Town a week later I was allowed on deck, supported on either side by my comrades as I was still too weak to walk. From there I ruefully watched as the rest of the Commando proceeded ashore to a tumultuous welcome. The quayside was jammed with cars and families eager to invite the men to their homes and take them on sight-seeing trips. All I could do was to rest in the warm sunshine and start my period of recovery. There was a repeat performance at Durban, when again I was confined to the ship. At that stage of the voyage we were still accompanied by the *Glasgow*, but on our way to Aden she left us to search for a rumoured German raider in the Indian Ocean. The three Glen ships steamed on at full speed, pausing only to refuel at Aden, where we were informed that our final destination was Suez. This caused us to speculate on where we were to be employed as raiders: in the Greek islands, Tobruk or with the Eighth Army in the desert? Whatever our fate, we were all happy at the prospect of being back on dry land again after thirteen weeks at sea. As we proceeded up the Red Sea it became impossible to sleep below in the holds, so we stayed on deck at night under the stars.

On arriving finally at Suez we proceeded into the Canal as far as the Great Bitter Lakes where we were put ashore in landing craft to a tented camp at Genefa. There we were issued with our tropical kit, including huge great

sola topis, quite the most cumbersome thing I have ever had to wear, and which incidentally we never used in the desert. It was from here that Layforce became split up, the individual Commandos being assigned to operations in various parts of the Mediterranean theatre. Thus the eighteen-year-old Guardsman Cooper was shortly to go to war.

2 The birth of an idea

The original mission envisaged for the Layforce Commandos was to mount an operation to capture Rhodes in order to prevent the Germans from establishing air bases there: not that we were told that. When we disembarked at the Suez Canal in February 1941, we had only a hazy knowledge of the progress of the war as a whole, which at the time was going well as far as the British were concerned. General Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, was riding on a wave of brilliant successes, rolling up the Italian Army in the Western Desert. By early February, British and Commonwealth troops had advanced some five hundred miles to El Agheila on the borders of Tripolitania, breaking the back of the Italian Army and garnering a rich harvest of prisoners. At the same time, however, German troops were landing in Tunisia under the command of a certain General Rommel, who was destined to seize the initiative in a spectacular manner. In distant Berlin, his master, Adolf Hitler, was also planning a series of spectacular coups prior to his invasion of Russia in the summer. All this was in the background as we sweated it out in camp near Suez.

Although aware of the German landings, Wavell was forced to detach forces to Greece to try to ward off an expected German blow there. In April, Rommel was ready. Taking the British by surprise, he outflanked the El Agheila position, and within two weeks our forces were right back on the Egyptian frontier, leaving only a garrison encircled in Tobruk. In the midst of this,

Layforce fell victim to the whims of the planners. By April it was obvious that it would be impossible to invade Rhodes. Yugoslavia had surrendered on 17 April and, in spite of the presence of British troops, the Greeks capitulated a week later.

From the base at Genefa, the Commandos of Layforce were split into various operations spread throughout the Middle East. No. 11 Scottish Commando was sent to the Lebanon to undertake operations against the Vichy French. Other units were sent to Crete where they were badly mauled by the German airborne invasion of the island. Our Guards Commando became involved in raids along the North African coast at Tobruk and Bardia. By May, Layforce was sadly depleted in numbers and, to put it mildly, was not exactly in the good books of Middle East Command. Our Commando was disbanded and the men were sent back where possible to their parent units.

I was returned to 2 Bn. Scots Guards, who together with 2 Bn. Coldstream Guards had been in the Middle East since the outbreak of the war. They had both taken part in Wavell's famous victory over the Italians where sixty thousand men had taken over two hundred thousand prisoners. My battalion was resting in the desert at a place called Bug Bug, our status being LOB or Left Out of Battle. On our arrival there, Lieutenant David Stirling departed for Cairo, saying that he would return in due course. It was only later that I discovered what he had been up to.

Stirling had realized that Layforce was far too immobile, relying for transport on the already overstretched Navy, and came to the conclusion that raiding by parachute was the answer, especially in view of the German successes in Crete. The problem was that there were no parachuting facilities in the whole of Middle East Command. Stirling had heard that a fellow officer from 8 Commando, Jock Lewes, had managed to 'obtain' some parachutes which had been unloaded at Alexandria in

error. He and a small group of Guardsmen had been authorized by Laycock to experiment with them. The only form of transport available was an ancient Vickers Valencia aircraft which was quite unsuitable for dropping troops. Stirling joined this group and a party consisting of two officers and six Guardsmen made the first drop. The only casualty was David Stirling himself whose parachute caught on the tail section of the aircraft as he exited. A hole was torn in the canopy and he fell too fast, injuring his back on landing.

A spell flat on his back in a military hospital was put to good use. Lying in bed armed with paper and a pencil, he began to write a paper outlining his ideas on raiding forces. His argument was that the Commandos were not only too immobile but that they were also too large. Surprise was the key to success; small groups of men dropped by parachute way behind the enemy lines whence they could issue forth to harass airfields and supply dumps. He proposed the raising of a force of sixty volunteers which would go into action just before the next big offensive. Splitting into small groups they would attack enemy aircraft on the ground and then fade away back into the desert.

The problem was how could a humble lieutenant present this plan to very senior officers? That he succeeded is by now well known. One morning in July 1941 he bluffed his way into Middle East headquarters, intent on seeing General Auchinleck who had recently replaced Wavell as Commander-in-Chief. Chased by a sentry he shot into the nearest office inside the building and eventually burst in on General Ritchie, the deputy chief-of-staff. To Stirling's surprise, Ritchie not only read the memorandum he had prepared but promised a decision within forty-eight hours. The plan obviously appealed to Auchinleck who had little to lose by it. Stirling, promoted to captain, was authorized to raise a force of sixty men and to set up a training camp near the Suez Canal. The new unit was to be known as L

Detachment of the SAS Brigade. Referring to it as a brigade was purely a deception to attempt to persuade the Germans that there was a large airborne force in the Middle East.

Obtaining the authority to raise the unit was one thing: the real battle started with the headquarters bureaucracy over obtaining the necessary supplies. Undaunted, Stirling went first into Tobruk, surrounded by the Germans, and recruited Jock Lewes. He then made his way to the desert camps where the men from 8 Commando were based, which was when he re-entered my life. The majority of the old 3 Troop volunteered and I crawled out of my foxhole to put in my application. Those of us who were accepted by Stirling were informed that we would be leaving Bug Bug for a place called Kabrit on the Suez Canal where we were to set up a base camp.

On arrival by lorry at Kabrit we were puzzled to find that there were only two medium-sized marquees and three 180lb tents piled up in the middle of the strip of bare desert allocated to us. No camp, none of the usual facilities, not even a flagpole. Across the road to the north was an RAF aerodrome and a mile or so further down was the Canal control station on Kabrit Point. Our lorry stopped outside one of the marquees and out strode the portly figure of CQMS Gerry Ward, who was eventually to become our quartermaster. He ordered us to collect picks and shovels and to start digging holes already marked out for the tentage. It was necessary to get the bases of the tents well below ground level on account of frequent enemy bombing raids and then surround them with walls of sandbags. So we set to under our section corporal, Jimmy Brough, and slogged away until we had completed ten such excavations, wondering meanwhile where the tents were to fill them. After a light meal the CQMS told us that that night we were to carry out the very first SAS raid – to obtain the necessary equipment to complete the camp!

Close by there was a very large encampment which belonged to a New Zealand division, the bulk of whose forces were fighting in Tobruk, leaving only a holding party in occupation. When night fell we split into small groups to infiltrate and pillage the Kiwis. Crawling inside we pulled out the pegs, rolled up the tents and, staggering under their weight, smuggled them back across the road to our own area. One group even managed to steal a piano for the sergeants' mess! The next job was to erect them as fast as possible in the ready-dug holes. Working through the night, filling sandbags to complete the tent perimeters, by dawn we had a permanent-looking camp. Perhaps this should be counted as our first operational success. As far as I know there were never any repercussions, although the New Zealanders must have been furious. Knowing David Stirling, he would certainly have hotly denied all knowledge of the thefts and would have blamed some other unit. Totally exhausted, we were allowed to collapse and sleep off the effects of our labours, but by the afternoon it was back to the more serious side of life. We met Jock Lewes, who was to be in charge of our training, and he outlined in great detail the programme he had in store for us. During his briefing he told us that we would have to learn to parachute, and as there was no airborne training centre in the Middle East we would have to form our own. This would entail the building of training towers, scaffolding, swings and gymnastic equipment for this specialist instruction.

Jock instilled into us that the end product of our training was for us to become independent in every way, operating either alone or in very small groups. We would have to develop an ingrained self-confidence in our ability to navigate across featureless terrain without any back-up whatsoever and using maps that gave little or no detail. We would have to survive on minimum sustenance and to control the use of food and water during the hot periods of the day, using the cover of darkness for offensive activity. Night work was to be the

most essential part of our training, coupled with skill in the handling of weapons of all types including German and Italian ones.

That evening other parties arrived including four more officers, Paddy Mayne, Bill Fraser, Chris Bonnington and our administrator, Captain Thomas. We were to spend the next week constructing twenty- and forty-foot jumping towers from scaffolding poles, plus the swings and all the other equipment used in parachute training at the time. Another of Jock Lewes's bright but nevertheless dangerous ideas was to make us jump from the tailboard of a Bedford 15 cwt. truck roaring across the desert at around 30 mph. The unsuspecting trainee had to crouch facing the front of the vehicle and then jump off backwards. Upon hitting the ground with considerable force he had to attempt a backward parachute roll. A considerable number of injuries resulted, which were treated with scant sympathy and a curt reminder that anyone permanently injured would be returned to their parent unit.

Having satisfactorily completed this very basic course we were introduced to 216 Squadron of RAF Transport Command which was equipped with Bombay aircraft – antiquated high-wing monoplanes driven by two Pegasus engines. On short trips from Kabrit to Cairo they had to turn back if the headwinds exceeded 50 mph, which gives an idea of their total air speed of about 90 mph. Very slow indeed! The Bombays were equipped with rails bolted onto the floor to which we had to attach our static lines which looked like dog leads. The idea was that, when we jumped, the static line would run out from our parachute packs and, when fully extended, would break away the strings at the back of the pack. This would force out the actual parachute which, when it opened, would snap the remaining string, leaving the static line dangling under the aircraft. All this seemed to us to be a very hazardous way of becoming parachute borne, bearing in mind that we had no reserve 'chute.

The day of our actual first drop arrived. I was in the first aircraft and once airborne felt a sense of complete detachment from my normal element as we flew over the Canal towards our dropping zone on the other side. Shut up inside the dark tunnel of the aircraft fuselage as it buffeted its way slowly upwards to gain height, my situation seemed unreal. Our jumping altitude was to be 900 feet and we were to go in pairs. When my turn came I felt desperately afraid, yet once through the door and hurtling out into the slipstream those feelings disappeared. I was brought up by the jolt of my parachute opening and the sudden stillness as I drifted slowly, as I thought, towards the ground. The view was terrific. I could see right down the Canal to the Gulf of Suez and, to my right, Ismailia was visible beside the Bitter Lakes. But as I neared the ground I realized that I was falling much faster than I had thought; quickly adopting the landing position, I made one of the gentlest landings that I would ever experience. Descending into a patch of soft drifting sand, I felt a sense of stupendous elation as I wrapped up my parachute and trotted over to the waiting transport.

Tragically, however, disaster struck on one of the aircraft after mine. As the first two men, Duffy and Warburton, jumped, the rings which attached the clips of their static lines to the rails inside the aircraft broke. The two men plunged to their deaths. Luckily the RAF dispatcher was able to stop the others from jumping. Back at base, Stirling assembled us all in one of the marquees and assured us that modifications would be made immediately. He also told us that parachute training would recommence the following morning, and that he would be the first to jump. He was quite right to get us into the air again as quickly as possible after the fatalities, as otherwise our confidence would have evaporated.

During our further training we carried out a lot of swimming exercises in the Canal and long marches in the desert. I suffered a minor injury jumping from the tailboard of a moving truck. Shortly after this I was

put on guard duty, which I considered dull stuff as I was most keen to assure myself that my injury had healed. I therefore skipped duty to scale the twenty-foot tower with my buddy, Mac McKay. I had just completed a second successful jump from the platform when Jock emerged from a nearby place of concealment. After commending my initiative he rocketed me for forgetting that my first duty was to guard my sleeping comrades. In spite of the tongue-lashing, however, I did not receive any further punishment.

By the end of August we were deemed ready for our final exercise. For this we were to mount a dummy attack on the RAF airfield at Heliopolis, just outside Cairo, a distance of about a hundred miles across open desert. We were all quite apprehensive about this as we felt that it was an impossible task and that we would suffer a lot of drop-outs on the way. Supplies were to consist of four water-bottles each, three pounds of dates and a few glucose sweets.

The entire unit of six officers and fifty-five men set out from Kabrit at night, carrying weights to simulate the bombs which we would have to cart along with us on a real raid. During the day we lay up in the desert, camouflaging ourselves with pieces of hessian sacking against the RAF patrols who were out looking for us from the air. The approach march was a complete success and all the small parties converged on the target area on time. Against all the odds offered by our local bookmakers we only had one man drop out, who was promptly returned to his unit (RTU'd). On the fourth night of the exercise we attacked the aerodrome in small groups entering from different directions, and adorned a large number of parked aircraft with sticky labels marked 'bomb'. We were later told that the following morning the station commander, in spite of being warned of the attack, was furious at the inability of the guards to apprehend any of the raiders. Back at Kabrit we had quite a celebration and were given pats on the back by Stirling and Lewes.

They told us that L Detachment was ready for its first operational task.

By the autumn of 1941, the Germans had almost complete air superiority over the desert battlefields. The Messerschmitt 109 fighter was vastly better than the Hurricanes and Tomahawks which made up the bulk of the Desert Air Force. An additional problem was that German aircraft flying from bases both in North Africa and Sicily could interfere with the convoys bringing vital supplies through the Mediterranean to Malta. Headquarters gave us the task of destroying as many enemy aircraft as possible on the ground. This was to coincide with a general attack on German and Italian forces which was scheduled to begin on 18 November.

Our mission was to jump from five 216 Squadron Bombays some twenty miles from the German airfields at Timmimi and Gazala, and attack them in small parties using our newly invented Lewes bombs. Having done so we were to retreat away to the south and rendezvous with a patrol from the Long Range Desert Group on the Trig al Ab, a track in the desert running east to west. They would then bring us home.

The Lewes bomb was named after its creator, Jock Lewes. The problem had been to perfect a device which when placed on the wing of an aircraft would both blow a hole in it and then ignite the fuel in the tanks inside. Army engineers experimented but could not come up with a bomb to fulfil both requirements. Jock Lewes started experimenting and eventually developed a bomb which consisted of one pound of plastic explosive which was rolled in a mixture of thermite from an incendiary bomb and old engine oil. To demonstrate it in front of a crowd of sceptical Sappers and RAF officers, an old aircraft wing with the tanks half filled with fuel was supported on two oil drums. A bomb was placed on top and when it detonated, fire gushed from the wing. To set the bombs off we used a time pencil and a no. 27 detonator which were carried separately and only activated just

before approaching a target. The time pencil consisted of different strengths of acid which would eat their way through a wire connected to the plunger of the detonator, giving delays of between ten minutes and two hours – or even longer if required.

On 15 November the Bombays took us from Kabrit to a forward base at Bagoush. The five aircraft were commanded by Stirling, Mayne, Lewes, MacGonagle and Bonnington. I was in Lewes's party and the senior NCO was Pat Riley, later to become our RSM. He had been a Coldstream Guards reservist serving in the police in East Anglia, who had been recalled to the colours at the outbreak of war. Throughout my service in the SAS during the Second World War, Pat took me under his wing, and in spite of the difference in our ages we became firm friends. This bond still prevails as I write this, well over forty years later.

At Bagoush we received reports of increasing wind speeds and thunderstorms approaching the central Mediterranean. Stirling summoned his officers and the pilots to discuss the situation. It was felt that to cancel the operation would cause a drop in morale and therefore they decided to go ahead. We took off with winds gusting up to 35 mph and our faithful old Bombays lurched one by one into the air. Before leaving, Jock had told us that whatever happened we had to stick together as the high winds could cause us to disperse on landing. He would give us the wind direction five minutes before the green jumping light went on.

'Now remember this, lads,' he said, 'set the back bearing of this on your compasses and you will have the best chance of locating the man who has jumped before you.'

We became slowly airborne, pitching and tossing in heavy cloud. We flew north over the Mediterranean at about 500 feet, hoping to deceive the enemy anti-aircraft gunners who were used to high-flying RAF planes *en route* to bomb their supply lines and the port of Benghazi.

After about an hour and a half the pilot informed us that we were about to cross the coast. As this information filtered down to the rear of the aircraft we were caught in a searchlight beam. At the same instant a firework display comparable with the fifth of November came up from the Italian ground defences, their streams of tracer seemingly converging on the Bombay. Our pilot flew magnificently. He flung the aircraft into dives, twisting and veering to port and starboard trying to evade the searchlights. I think that all of us were terrified as we were thrown about in the narrow fuselage, imagining that at any minute we would plunge into the ground. Bits of kit broke loose and flew about, adding to the confusion. Although it seemed like minutes, after a few seconds we were once again in darkness. On full power our ancient conveyance was managing all of 90 mph but we were not out of the woods. Almost immediately two more searchlights caught us, the pale light illuminating the anxiety on our faces. Jock shouted above the roaring of the engines that we were to hook on our static lines in case we had to jump in a hurry. We were hit, but luckily not in any vital part, and with a final dive we cleared the coastal strip, to the immense relief of all of us.

The pilot straightened up and rose back up to five hundred feet. The green light had come on. As we stood up and got ready, Jock said that the pilot was not exactly sure of our position because of the atrocious weather and the activities of the anti-aircraft gunners. He added that the wind speed was force nine. The navigator came aft to wish us luck and gave us the wind direction. Then suddenly we were given the signal and the whole stick jumped together. I felt a terrific tug as my parachute opened and then I was swinging in comparative quietness except for the wind howling through my rigging lines.

I could see two other parachutes which both seemed to be drifting away at a vast speed. As it was impossible to see the ground I kept my legs braced, but when I hit the desert I suffered a tremendous jolt right through my

body. Before I could gather myself properly I found myself being dragged across the desert at more than 30 mph by the wind. Vainly I banged at the quick release box into which the straps of my harness were clamped, to jettison my parachute, only to realize that in a moment of panic I had failed to turn it first to unlock it. Finally I managed to get out of the harness and, luckily for me, the parachute that was dragging me along got tangled in a camel thorn bush. I managed to roll clear just as it flew off into the air, never to be seen again.

Climbing stiffly to my feet, I felt for broken bones and realized that apart from bruises, scratches and slight dizziness I was still intact. Finding my compass I started to walk back along the bearing given by the navigator, and almost immediately bumped into another member of my stick. Miraculously, after about an hour, the entire stick was assembled and without injury. All but two containers, however, were missing, with our food, water, Lewes bombs and Thompson sub-machine-guns.

Jock Lewes held an impromptu conference. 'Well fellows, I don't know where we are, so we can only carry out the operation assuming that we may be within five to ten miles of our original dropping zone.' Our original intention had been to move forward to the escarpment overlooking the airfield and then to prepare for the attack the following night. So we set off and walked through the remainder of that night. As dawn broke we were greeted with a torrential downpour of tropical scale. This at least solved our water problem, as the desert was transformed into a sea of mud. The rain continued to pour down and the thunder in the background played havoc with our compasses, making navigation very difficult.

At last Jock stopped and said: 'Well, we can't be anywhere near our target, which means that our dropping position must have been far more inaccurate than we thought. With conditions as they are at the present, our only hope is to try to locate our rendezvous with the Long Range Desert Group.' Later we were to learn

that this was the worst hurricane and rain storm that had been registered in the area for thirty years. We just stood there, our backs to the wind, with the rain pelting down and soaking us to the skin. Before long the whole desert was swimming in four to five inches of water.

After a while, however, the rain eased off a bit and we set off once again for the rendezvous. As it was quite obvious that we would have nothing to blow up, Jock Lewes took the obvious decision to place our remaining explosives in a pile and insert a time pencil with a twenty-minute lag. Completely sodden we tramped off towards the Trig al Ab. Many of the wadis (desert valleys) we had to cross were raging torrents and at times we had to sit and wait for them to subside. Then suddenly there was an explosion – in front of us. We reckoned that it must have been our Lewes bombs and that we had gone around in a complete circle due to the electrical storm affecting our navigation.

The storm stopped as instantly as it had started. The sun rose, and as the clouds cleared we were able to dry ourselves and take stock of the bedraggled raiding party. Water would be no problem as it was lying everywhere, especially in the deep ruts in the sand left by the tanks, which only a few months previously had been locked in battle in that area. We were in flat featureless terrain that ran for miles in each direction, with nothing to indicate where we were. Jock ordered us to leave the contents in our bottles and to drink the abundant rainwater.

We marched off in a south-westerly direction determined to locate our escape route, the Trig al Ab. This so-called road, which is about five miles wide, ran from Cyrenaica to the Egyptian border, some thirty-odd miles south of the coast. Our only problem would be, when we hit it, whether to turn east or west to locate our rendezvous with Major Jock Easton's New Zealanders, R Patrol of the LRDG. As we walked on it became much warmer, the clouds disappeared and visibility increased. We were not moving in tactical formation as there would be no

reason for the enemy to search for us so far south of the battle area. If any vehicle had approached we would have heard it miles away and could have gone to ground.

As it got warmer our morale increased, and then, up in front with Jock Lewes, my young eyes caught a glimpse of something sticking up on the horizon. Excitedly I went forward and said: 'Sir, I think I can see a signpost up there.' Lewes pulled out his binoculars as I indicated the direction. After a few minutes' observation, he passed them to me. 'You're completely right in your assumption, lad,' he said. 'But will it be pointing in the right direction and will it have anything written on it?' He consulted with Sergeant Riley and then turned to me. 'Go on, young lad, you saw it first. You'll see if we're in luck's way or not.'

I was trembling with anticipation as I led the patrol forward to the object standing in a shimmering heat haze. When we were four or five hundred yards away, I could contain myself no longer. I ran up to the signpost which I recognized as an Italian one from the Fascist symbol on the faded metal plate. Written across the top was Trig al Ab with Benghazi to the west and Sollum to the east. The rest of the patrol joined me. 'Well,' Jock said, 'we have made the Trig al Ab. We won't toss a coin to decide which way to turn, but will hope that the wind has blown us further east than we anticipated. We'll turn west and perhaps be able to find our way to Tobruk, or maybe the British advance starting today will catch up with us.'

We carried on marching with our morale once more up to its usual high standard, resting every two hours for ten minutes or so. Heaving our packs on the ground we rested weary limbs and even managed to snatch a few minutes' sleep. Our food was limited to hard chocolate emergency rations and biscuits, but there was still no shortage of water. As night fell the sky was full of stars. There were so many that I became a little confused. However, I fixed my gaze on one that seemed to look different from the other twinkling specks in the

sky. 'Sir,' I said to our leader, 'I believe I can see a light which I don't think is a star.' Jock said that he would check it, and once again got out his binoculars. After a few moments' study he turned back to me and patted me affectionately on the shoulder. 'You're right again! It must be our rendezvous with the LRDG. It isn't one single light. There are two lights placed on twin hillocks about a hundred yards apart on the edge of a small escarpment. This must be the pre-arranged homing device agreed on with the LRDG.' I felt pretty pleased with myself!

Again Jock consulted Sergeant Riley, and decided that for the sake of security I should go forward until I was about a hundred yards from the lights. We would then gather together and start singing the password which was 'Roll out the Barrel'. The patrol broke into song and the answer came from one of the twin hillocks. One of the lanterns was waved and we realized that we had made the rendezvous.

We completed the last few yards in Olympic time and, as we rounded the hillocks and came into a small depression, we saw the LRDG vehicles, clustered around a fire. The Kiwis welcomed us into their camp with mugs of hot tea liberally laced with rum, followed by a fine bully beef stew. We were the first to arrive.

Our entire plane load had suffered no casualties other than the scrapes and bruises from the rough landing, but the story did not have a happy ending for the other four aircraft. Eventually others came straggling in; David Stirling with only one man, Bob Tate, and finally, Paddy Mayne with half his patrol. Our survivors were eighteen men and four officers out of a total of fifty-five men and seven officers who had dropped. We waited a further thirty-six hours in hopes that others would turn up, but nobody else appeared. So our greatly depleted group set off back in the LRDG vehicles for Siwa Oasis on the Egyptian border. During the bumpy ride in the trucks we were all rather subdued. In a small unit like

ours such losses are always hard to bear. The missing men were all close buddies with whom we had shared the hardships of training and life at close quarters in camp. We noticed too the worried expressions on the faces of the officers as they sat together discussing the operation. It was clear to David Stirling that he was going to have to rethink our operational methods and that the first SAS raid had been a disaster.

3 Desert apprenticeship

During the journey back to Siwa Oasis, jolting over the desert in the back of the LRDG trucks, we also discussed amongst ourselves how we would tackle our next operation. In spite of the fact that our force was severely depleted, we were all certain that we would get another chance and David Stirling expressed great optimism about the future. He told us that he was very impressed by the LRDG's ability to move about the desert and reasoned that their patrols could drop us off. We would then walk in silently in three-man patrols, complete our sabotage and return to a pre-arranged rendezvous. We had to admit to ourselves that we had failed on our first operation, but we had learnt many valuable lessons for the future.

On arrival at Siwa, David Stirling flew off back to Cairo, while we waited to be picked up. He learnt that the attack which we had intended to support had bogged down and that Rommel had mounted a counterattack. General Cunningham was sacked from command of the Eighth Army and replaced by General Ritchie. While in Cairo, Stirling met Brigadier Marriott who was in command of 22nd Guards Brigade. From him he found out that Brigadier Reid had captured the Jalo Oasis from the Italians. This was some hundred and fifty miles south from the coast and well behind enemy lines. It seemed the most suitable spot for a new operating base for us, especially as units of the LRDG were intending to establish themselves there.

The Long Range Desert Group was the brainchild

of Major R.A. Bagnold, who had been engaged in exploring the Libyan desert before the war, using specially adapted vehicles. In June 1940 he persuaded Middle East Headquarters that there was a need for reconnaissance behind enemy lines, and was permitted to raise a force. Gathering in some of his companions from prewar expeditions and recruiting other volunteers, notably a considerable number of New Zealanders, he formed the LRDG. Its mission was essentially the gathering of intelligence about enemy troop movements and supply lines, rather than offensive action. Much of the work consisted of road watching, often for several weeks at a time, and using radio sets to transmit the information gathered back to their base. For transport they used specially modified Chevrolet trucks and developed an ability to navigate in the trackless desert using sun compasses.

The remnants of L Detachment SAS Brigade were flown down to Jalo where we met up with Major Steele of the LRDG and Captain Gus Holliman's S Patrol, made up of Rhodesians. They were a grand bunch of chaps, used to spending long periods of time living in remote areas of the African bush. When out in the middle of nowhere, they would provide for us by shooting the odd gazelle to supplement our bully beef and hard biscuits. Jalo itself was a typical Foreign Legion outpost, straight out of *Beau Geste*. Rolling white sand dunes surrounded a large oasis of swaying palm trees with a square white fort in the middle. This guarded a series of artesian wells producing evil-looking but supposedly potable water which had a distinctly salty flavour.

North-west of Jalo by about two hundred and fifty miles lay the Gulf of Sirte. Along the coast road in the area was a whole string of Axis advanced airfields which were selected as the next target for our attentions. Since General Ritchie had taken command of the Eighth Army the fortunes of war had been reversed and Rommel was in retreat towards Gazala. Stirling's plan was for two

parties, led by himself and Paddy Mayne, to set off on 8 December 1941 to attack Sirte aerodrome. Jock Lewes and Bill Fraser were to leave a few days later for other targets.

While at Jalo I had been transferred to Stirling's crew and was to remain with him until he was captured almost a year later. Packed into seven 30 cwt. trucks, we set off to the north across the tip of the Great Sand Sea. This was a constant nightmare to the drivers and navigators because of the treacherous surface near the bases of the very high sand dunes. Soft going could halt a truck doing 40 mph in a matter of yards, the entire wheels and chassis disappearing into soft white sand. Any occupants not holding on would be thrown violently forward and often right out of the vehicle. Another problem was crossing the ridges of the dunes which could form hidden razor backs with a drop of anything up to fifteen feet. A vehicle would be completely airborne, only to land with a bone-shaking crash seconds later.

When a truck got bogged down, the drill was as follows. The crew would pick themselves up and unload as much of the gear on board as possible. Then we had to pull out the sand mats and sand trays and start to dig out the wheels. The mats went under the front wheels and the steel channels under the rear ones. With the engine churning away in low gear, all hands pushed until the rear wheels were standing firmly on the channels. Then we would get the channels from other vehicles and start feeding them in as our truck inched its way forward. This was back-breaking work as each channel was almost too heavy for one man to lift, especially during the heat of the day. The whole operation could be infuriatingly frustrating when the vehicle behind, seeing your predicament, would veer to left or right and roar past at 40 mph – its crew grinning with delight and giving the V sign to us grovelling away in the sand.

After we crossed the edge of the Sand Sea we headed towards the Wadi Farigh. This was extremely deep and

ran for miles, east to west, along the coast of the Gulf of Sirte from Agedabia to a point south of Marble Arch. The latter was the name given by the British to a pompous triumphal arch built by Mussolini slap in the middle of the desert to mark the border between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. So steep were the sides of the wadi that we had to motor for several miles before Gus Holliman could find a way down onto the floor of the valley. We then had to carry on along the floor to find a way out again on the other side. At this stage we split up into two groups to lessen the chance of observation from the air. By the end of the fourth day, the Rhodesian navigator, Mike Sadler, calculated that we were fifty miles to the south of the town of Sirte.

David Stirling and Gus Holliman then set out in a pick-up truck for a recce of the target area. They identified the airfield but there were only a few planes on the ground. Through binoculars they noticed wire defences and a certain amount of Italian activity. On their way back they had numerous alarms from low-flying aircraft that seemed to be circling as if to land – but not at Sirte. This led them to believe that there had to be another landing strip in the area which had not been plotted by our Intelligence people. Turning the pick-up round and following the direction of the aircraft they discovered a busy fighter base at Tamit; there appeared to be some fifty planes parked there.

Delighted with their success, the recce party made their way back to where we were hiding in the desert. The standard drill to avoid being seen by enemy aircraft when camped was to spread out the trucks as far as possible and to park them under the lee of sand dunes covered with camouflage netting. We would then walk back sweeping away the traces of tyre tracks with bundles of brushwood.

At the subsequent conference it was decided that David Stirling, accompanied by Jimmy Brough, Charlie Catell and myself, would take on Sirte, while Paddy Mayne

would go for Tamit, accompanied by Reg Seekings, Bob Bennett, Johnnie Rose and Dave Kershaw. During the remainder of the day we prepared our bombs, oiled our weapons and sorted out food and water in preparation for the approach march. When night fell, the LRDG boys, superbly navigated by Mike Sadler, dropped our party very near the main coast road. Parked with the engine switched off, we heard the steady drone of enemy traffic along the road only a few yards away. In the dark moonless night we said farewell to our taxi service and, collecting our rucksacks and weapons, slipped off into the shadows.

At first, David led us up the road, but the passing headlights silhouetted our strange get-up. We must have looked a villainous crew, carrying large rucksacks and sub-machine-guns and wearing stocking caps. Anything less like Afrika Korps or Italian dress could hardly be imagined. So we moved off to the side and walked parallel to the road, relieved to be once more in comparative darkness.

We were within about fifty yards of the wire when we noticed two Italian sentries who were manning a road block to our left. Hoping to manage to cut through the wire we held to our course, but suddenly Jimmy Brough froze and dropped to the ground. He whispered loud enough for all of us to hear, 'For God's sake stop the boss, we're in a minefield.' Only then did I notice the very neat tripwires stretching across the sand between evil-looking mounds. 'Mines!' Jimmy and I hissed and David came to a halt. Instead of turning back he yelled out, 'What the bloody hell's the matter?' The reaction to this was that both sentries on the road block became noisy, perhaps trying to warn us about the mines, unaware that we were British. That was hardly surprising as we were four hundred miles behind their lines. Thankfully David did eventually turn back and, when we were all together, we agreed that we stood little chance of penetrating into such a highly defended area.

By then the Italians were getting extremely excited and were shouting unintelligible instructions at us. Why they didn't open fire, nobody will ever know.

Somewhat disheartened we set off back to our rendezvous with Gus Holliman, our only consolation being to place bombs on some Italian lorries parked along the road. As we left the area of our abortive mission, the sky to the east was illuminated by a succession of flashes which suggested that Paddy had had happy hunting at Tamit. When we met up back at our base we heard the news. He had destroyed a total of twenty-four aircraft on the ground and the pilots' mess had been grenaded and machine-gunned in murderous style. Paddy, in his quiet Irish manner, dismissed the whole affair as a normal night's work.

It was from Reg Seekings that I got the details of the attack. They had had no difficulties in approaching the target area and saw the fighter aircraft silhouetted in their dispersal positions. They split up into two pairs, Paddy and Reg, and Bob and Dave. Crawling stealthily forward they positioned their bombs without discovery, then lay quietly near the aerodrome buildings to wait for the first explosions. As the peace of the night was shattered by the detonations, Paddy and Reg strode forward to the pilots' mess, opened the door and emptied their Tommy guns inside. After that they beat a hasty retreat from the burning building until they encountered a Messerschmitt which had previously been overlooked. Without hesitation and as all their bombs had been used up, Paddy climbed up onto the wing, reached into the cockpit and tore out the instrument panel with his bare hands. On the way back to the rendezvous, Reg was disconcerted by the luminous glow from the instruments and the fact that the clock was still ticking.

Our party met up with the LRDG patrol at three o'clock in the morning and shortly afterwards we set off southwards to an area more suitable for concealment as we were certain that by dawn there would be an air

search for us. Oddly enough, we later found out that the enemy had decided that the attacks must have come from the sea. Our distance behind their lines was such that German military intelligence decided that an attack over land was an impossibility.

Shortly before dawn we reached an area of scrub criss-crossed by small gullies, where we dispersed the vehicles and covered them with camouflage nets. After that, some of us walked back down the tyre tracks rubbing them out with bunches of camel thorn for at least a mile from our lying-up place. Later that day we were extremely thankful for having taken such precautions. At about midday, Gus Holliman gave the signal that an aircraft was approaching and we all took cover. Instead of a reconnaissance aircraft, however, two Messerschmitt Me109s swept low over the desert dipping their wings from side to side so that the pilots could see. They came to within about two miles of us and then, to our horror, turned south towards us, probably having seen our old outward tracks. But then they turned away again and flew off to the north, perhaps to recce the beaches from which we were supposed to have come. Sensibly we spent the daylight hours well dispersed and only closed up at dusk for a well-earned meal. News of Paddy's attack was radioed back to Cairo, who replied that a reconnaissance aircraft had already confirmed the success of the operation. Feeling this time somewhat more pleased with ourselves we returned to Jalo where we celebrated with the usual hot lime juice laced with rum. A few days later, Jock Lewes and Bill Fraser returned with their men. The latter had managed to knock out thirty-seven aircraft at Agedabia. David's theories had been magnificently vindicated.

Within a few days we were off again to the same area for a series of raids on Sirte, Tamit, Agedabia and El Agheila. Three whole patrols from the LRDG and twenty SAS men were to be involved. By this time the LRDG had been christened the Desert Taxi Company

and they responded with a number of nicknames for us. One of them I recall was The Parashites, perhaps implying our supposed parasitical nature and punning this with parachutes and 'shites'! There was probably a bit of jealousy involved as many of their men would have loved to have been out with us blowing up aircraft, but their mission was intelligence gathering rather than offensive operations.

David had allotted himself the task of having a second crack at Sirte, while Paddy was to return to Tamit. Our officers assumed that the Italians would hardly expect us to return quite so promptly. Once again it was Paddy who had all the luck, adding a further twenty-seven aircraft to his total bag. David Stirling's party, which I accompanied, had to suffer the frustration of being again thwarted by the defences around the airfield. We were hampered by bad going on our approach and when we reached the coast road it was choked by a German armoured division on the move, heading towards Rommel's new front at El Agheila. Unable to get onto the airfield and with time running short, we had to make our way back to the LRDG trucks. Our only consolation was shooting up enemy traffic on the road which we left behind us in a total confusion of blazing vehicles.

The return to Jalo was marred by bad news. Jock Lewes had mounted a successful raid on Agedabia, but while returning with the Kiwi patrol they were attacked by German fighters. Lewes was hit by a 20mm cannon shell and died instantly. The survivors managed to get one vehicle running by cannibalizing the wreckage of the patrol and limped back to Jalo. Jock had been our training officer right from the beginning and had always striven hard to give us the best possible background to equip us for our tasks. He was a man we all greatly respected.

From Jalo we returned to our base at Kabrit, feeling rather pleased with ourselves. Reconnaissance flights

confirmed that our twenty-one operational personnel had destroyed a hundred and nine enemy aircraft on the ground, which was considerably better than the RAF had managed. David Stirling hurried off to Middle East HQ in Cairo, as usual full of new plans for the employment of L Detachment. General Auchinleck's offensive was going well, with the enemy in full retreat towards Benghazi, and David calculated that they would have to shift their supply base further west – to the tiny port of Bouerat. Our aim was to enter the harbour, blow up any shipping present, and destroy the oil installations and supply dumps. In order to utilize the moonless period, we would have to be back in Jalo ready to set off by 10 January 1942.

We left Jalo with a troop from G Patrol of the LRDG, and for once we were without the services of Paddy Mayne, who had been left behind to take over the role of training officer at Kabrit. The run to the target area was fairly uneventful except for the attentions of some Italian bombers. With the aim of sinking ships in the harbour we had with us two people from the Special Boat Squadron equipped with a folding canoe. This got smashed when we hit a pothole, but as there were no ships in port it did not matter anyway. For the actual raid we all crammed ourselves and our gear into one truck which took us down onto the coast road. Splitting up into teams we ranged through the deserted port area, placing our bombs in the warehouses, and on the way out we discovered a vast collection of giant tanker lorries. The sentries were apparently all asleep, so we fanned out, planting our Lewes bombs on the petrol tanks with half-hour time pencils, which meant that we had to work fast. Occasionally we bumped into one of the other parties skulking around in the dark, and when we had used up all our bombs we sat down beside the road to wait for the explosions to begin. Within minutes the whole dump went up, the roars of the explosions pierced by the shouting of the Italians. Well pleased, we slipped away

into the darkness and our rendezvous with the truck. There we discovered that we still had some bombs left, so David Stirling decided to motor on down the road to look for some more targets.

In the dead of night, miles behind enemy lines, our truck sped along, stopping every now and again when we saw a parked truck. Our bombs finally used up, we then turned round and located the track running off into the desert towards our rendezvous with the rest of the LRDG patrol. Our minds were mainly occupied with thoughts of the welcoming tea and rum which would be waiting for us.

Prior to this operation we had been issued with a single Vickers 'K' aircraft-type machine-gun which was mounted on the back of our Ford V-8 13 cwt. truck, and yours truly was the gunner. I had been trained on this weapon and had a 100-round magazine in position, but as there was no anticipation of further enemy action that night I was sitting quite relaxed behind the gun. As the LRDG vehicles had no cabs, I had good forward vision over the head of Gibson, the driver, and beside me was Reg Seekings with a Thompson sub-machine-gun.

As we motored at speed along the track we suddenly noticed flashing lights up ahead of us and a few isolated shots whizzed through the air. Whether they were warning shots or the enemy clearing their guns we did not know, but as our truck accelerated down a slight incline it became painfully obvious that an ambush had been set up. Perhaps they expected to meet us on foot as in previous operations, for we certainly took them by surprise. I slipped off the safety catch and let fly with a devastating mixture of tracer and incendiary, amazed at the firepower of the Vickers. At the same time, Reg opened up with his Thompson, and we ploughed through the ambush completely outgunning and demoralizing the Italians. Gibson, with great presence of mind, switched on the headlamps and roared away at about 40 mph, driving with absolute efficiency and coolness to extricate

us from a difficult position. Later, this excellent soldier from the Scots Guards was awarded the Military Medal for this operation.

The enemy continued to fire mortar rounds at us but we were soon out of range, and with lights switched off we continued south. This was the first time that the Vickers 'K' was fired in action by the SAS, a weapon which we were to continue to make our speciality throughout the rest of the war. I felt very proud at having been the first to fire it and Reg was brimming over with enthusiasm. He said that it was a wonderful gun and if only we could put two of them together we could really create havoc. Looking back across the desert towards Bouerat, the sky was still floodlit by the fires from the burning depots and tanker lorries, of which we had probably accounted for seventy.

What we did not know at the time was that the tide of war had turned. Rommel had counterattacked while we were out in the desert and had forced the Eighth Army back to the Gazala line. This in turn meant that Jalo Oasis was vulnerable, and when we returned there at the end of January we found only a rearguard of the LRDG. Thus we left immediately for Siwa Oasis and from there motored back to Kabrit.

It was at this time that Reg, Bob Bennett, Charlie Catell and I were promoted to sergeant. The backbone of the unit was still the twenty-one original survivors but new recruits were in training, including a squadron of Free French parachutists. Jimmy Brough was already a sergeant and Pat Riley was our RSM. It was decided that 'Young Cooper' was to be inducted into the sergeants' mess, for which L Detachment had a standing requirement. Once you were promoted you had to go to the bar on first entering the mess and drink a pint of whatever drink you designated without taking your lips from the glass. One Saturday morning, Reg and I entered the mess tent and were welcomed by Pat Riley. To me he said, 'Well, Young Cooper, I know you don't drink

alcohol, so you had better have a non-alcoholic drink.' 'Yes, Sergeant-Major,' I replied, somewhat overawed by the whole occasion. Pat continued, 'We have a drink here which is definitely non-alcoholic – it's called cherry brandy.' A tankard was filled with red liquid and handed to me. At first it was quite sweet and enjoyable but then I found it sickly and thick. I only just managed to get it down before bolting from the tent just in time to get rid of the contents of my stomach. For the next two days I had a permanent hangover and have never touched the stuff since.

During our short leaves in Cairo, we stayed in a small place called the New Hotel, in Suleiman Pasha Street quite close to the British Embassy. This was run by a delightful character whom we christened the 'Honest Greek'. As we were not paid while out on operations, our money accumulated, and he kept our large paypackets in his safe and issued us with cash daily to ensure that we would not be rooked by pickpockets and prostitutes. In all the months we used this hotel, not one member of our unit lost a penny from his safe.

David Stirling used his brother Peter's flat which was attached to the Embassy where he was the Third Secretary. We were often summoned there and would find David in the library with maps and aerial photos spread out all over the floor. Reg and I would be put to work helping with the planning of the next operation, sorting out such details as rations, fuel requirements, ammunition and routes. It was at this time that we realized that David Stirling was pushing himself terribly hard. He suffered from migraine which meant wearing dark glasses and was often sick with desert sores which refused to heal. Until new officers were recruited, the responsibility for running the regiment fell on himself and Paddy Mayne. Stirling had been promoted to major, but missed Jock Lewes. Paddy was a born operator and did not take kindly to being left behind to manage the training.

The next possible moonless period for operations was in mid-March and the main aim was to attack shipping in Benghazi harbour, by that time firmly back in enemy hands. In addition we were to raid airfields in the area. Accompanied once again by a small group of the Special Boat Section with a collapsible canoe, we set off across the desert from Siwa to the Trig al Ab – a distance of nearly five hundred miles which it took us a week to cover. As far as Benghazi was concerned, the operation was a disappointment. We managed to drive into the town but found the harbour area wired in and well guarded. On attempting to assemble the canoe it was discovered that it was damaged, and anyway the waves were too high for a successful launch. Failing to find any useful targets we returned to the rendezvous. During the week, we went twice to Benina airfield with David Stirling. The only aircraft present were dummies, but we managed to blow up a dump of aerial torpedoes. The airfield was well guarded and was apparently a repair depot. The only real success was enjoyed by Paddy Mayne, who managed to account for fifteen aircraft at Berka Satellite aerodrome. The various recces, however, were to prove extremely useful during the coming months.

4 Lewes bombs and limpet mines

David Stirling, twice thwarted, was still determined to blow up enemy shipping, having proved that it was possible to get into the harbour at Benghazi. This was quite close behind the enemy lines and was their major supply base as well as housing Italian submarines. He felt that if we could penetrate the harbour and sink enough shipping we might be able to block it for quite some while. To strengthen the team, David Stirling obtained the services of Captain Fitzroy Maclean, who before the war had been in the diplomatic service and spoke fluent Italian. As further back-up we had Captain Gordon Alston who had been the town major when the British last controlled the port.

The problem was how to enter the town without arousing suspicion. David considered we should drive in by car and that we should try to make it look like an enemy vehicle. We had managed to get hold of a Ford V-8 staff car which had the top removed down to the level of the doors. The suspension was modified to cope with desert travel and armament consisted of twin Vickers 'K' at the rear and a single one at the front on the passenger side. The whole of the boot was turned into an extra petrol tank and further equipment included a sun compass and water condensers. We painted it a drab olive green with the monthly German air recognition mark across the bonnet. This was the famous Blitz Buggy that became David Stirling's pride and joy.

The aim was to simply drive into the town dressed in scruffy mufti rather than foreign uniform, park the

vehicle, and use inflatable dinghies to place limpet mines on any ships present. Fitzroy had obtained the inflatables with the aid of Bill Cumper, our engineer officer, as they were considered far less vulnerable than the folding canoes we had tried before. Bill also trained us in the use of limpet mines and we practised with the boats in the choppy waters of the Suez Canal at Kabrit until we were proficient enough to carry out a final exercise. David, without consulting the Navy or the officials at Port Suez, conceived the idea of a true to life exercise with the SAS playing the role of enemy raiders in this high security area.

We had divided up into two teams each manning one boat. David took Reg with him and I was paired with Fitzroy Maclean. We drove to Suez, and carrying the boats and dummy limpet mines we managed to infiltrate the dock area until we arrived at the edge of the water. There, both teams inflated their dinghies and silently slipped into the water, paddling until we were in the middle of a large convoy. Having succeeded in attaching our mines onto a number of the ships, we retreated back to shore, deflated the boats, and returned to Kabrit before daybreak. The next day there was uproar when the Navy and the Port authorities discovered the mines on so many valuable merchant ships. David admitted that we were responsible, only to be told that the security forces in the harbour often dropped man-sized depth charges into the water to deter saboteurs, and would often spray the area with machine-guns if anything suspicious was sighted. We could all have been killed on this exercise. David calmly pointed out that the exercise would have been pointless if the 'enemy' had known of our intentions. Reg and I were most vitriolic about the risk to which we had been exposed, and we hoped that the Germans would be just as inefficient!

We set off to raid Benghazi in the middle of May from Siwa. We accompanied an LRDG patrol led by Robin Gurdon who would convoy us as far as the Jebel

mountains south of Benghazi. Our party in the 'Blitz Buggy' consisted of David, Gordon Alston, Fitzroy Maclean, myself and Corporal Rose. Reg had damaged his hand with a detonator explosion at Siwa, so his place was taken by Randolph Churchill, the Prime Minister's son, who had come with us to Siwa. We left the LRDG at the Jebel and set off along the east to west roadway on the escarpment. David drove, with Maclean and Alston in the front, and myself, Johnnie Rose and Churchill in the back. There was a slight moon and we could see the line of the road ahead with the silhouettes of the telephone poles stretching away into the distance.

David stopped the car at one of the poles. Leaning back, he said, 'Young Cooper, up that pole you go and cut the wires.' Seizing the wire cutters I scrambled up the flimsy sixteen-foot pole and snipped four strands. The night silence shattered as they parted with a terrific twanging noise. We waited with bated breath for any sign of enemy curiosity, but the silence returned. There was obviously nobody around. I slithered down, jumped back into the Blitz Buggy and, as we moved off, felt a nudge from Randolph who pushed across his water bottle saying, 'You could do with a drink after that, Sergeant.' I uncorked the bottle, took an enormous swallow, and choked violently, for it was full of neat rum. David, on smelling the rum and hearing me coughing, turned round, grabbed the bottle with one hand and threw it into the night. 'Captain Churchill, we never drink on operations,' he said serenely.

Descending the escarpment was a little tricky, but once at the bottom we found a very presentable dirt road which ran alongside the airfield at Benina which we had visited before. Then we came across a road block. The barrier was up and two Italian sentries lounged at one side under a lantern. We drove slowly through, our fingers nervously tensed on the triggers of our weapons, and Fitzroy shouted out that we were German officers. There was no response at all from the sentries. After this

we hit the tarmac road and Gordon Alston took over the navigation, for he was almost as familiar with Benghazi as with his home town. On the smooth surface, David accelerated the 'Blitz Buggy' which started to emit a loud screaming noise. During the long approach march across the desert the wheels had moved out of alignment so that one of the tyres, now on a hard unyielding surface, created a drag. Neither slowing down nor accelerating made any difference. The only solution would have been to stop and jack up the vehicle, which under the circumstances would hardly have been practical. At this point, a vehicle drew out of a side turning and gave chase. As David put his foot down, the wretched tyre complained in a continual high-pitched screech, shortly accompanied by the wail of sirens. We saw the probing fingers of searchlights against the night sky. David craned round. 'Don't worry,' he said calmly. 'I laid on with my friends of the RAF for a good Blenheim battering on Benghazi tonight to cover us.'

By then we were going at quite a speed and already into the outskirts of the town. We dodged down side streets into the Arab quarter, managed to lose our pursuer, and came to a shuddering halt in an area of bombed-out ruins. A quick conference took place as we all believed that we had been given away by Intelligence or had been spotted on our approach. Perhaps even cutting the telephone wires had given the game away. Stirling gave orders to Rose and myself to place bombs on the 'Blitz Buggy', take our food and water, lie up in the ruins and then try to get back to the rendezvous with the LRDG the following night. On leaving the Buggy, however, we were stopped by air raid wardens. Fitzroy chatted away to them in Italian and ascertained that an air raid was expected; our followers on the road had been wardens trying to get us to extinguish our headlights! David immediately instructed me to run back to the Buggy and make the bombs safe. I have never been so scared in my life as I struggled in the dark to place the safety pin back into the

ten-minute time pencil and remove the detonator from the Lewes bomb.

An empty garage was spotted only a few yards from our position at the rear of an evacuated house, so we drove the car inside, closed the door and took possession, as Randolph put it, of 'No. 10 Downing Street'. As it was still dark it was decided to continue with the operation. Loaded up like pack mules and guided by Gordon Alston, we made our way down to the docks. David went on ahead to recce the wire fence, and luckily found a gap through which we were able to squeeze. I followed Fitzroy down to the edge of the water, carrying the bulky bundle of the boat on my shoulder and a Thompson in my right hand. David decided to return for the second boat while Fitzroy and I attempted to inflate our dinghy. Would it inflate? Would it hell. We pumped and pumped, but it was obvious that the valve had been damaged during the trip across the desert. By this time we noticed that there was a lot of movement on a very large freighter moored only about a hundred yards from our position. Probably the noise we were making in trying to inflate the infernal thing had alerted the sentries on board. Out of the still night came a challenge amplified by the water, to which Fitzroy replied with 'Mia Italia' and a string of words which I did not understand.

We then decided that I should return for the second dinghy, but as I passed through the wire I bumped into David, who had this valuable bit of equipment with him. We hastened back to the water's edge to rejoin Fitzroy. Believe it or not, the second boat also failed to respond to our vigorous pumping. By then, there was so much activity on the ship adjacent to our position that we realized that we were blown. Lights came on, and over the still night air we heard metal doors slamming and excited voices shouting. There was nothing for it but to make good our escape. David boldly decided that as dawn was approaching the quickest way out was to walk

through the main gate. So, hoisting the two boats on my shoulders, and with David carrying the limpet mines, we followed Fitzroy in single file. We must have looked a fearsome bunch to be walking around at night in an enemy dockyard, dressed as we were in an odd assortment of scruffy clothes, and sporting beards. Although in theory we were in uniform, the SAS in the desert tended to be lax, preferring such items as pullovers and corduroy trousers.

When our party arrived at the guardroom which controlled entry to the docks, Fitzroy, as cool as a cucumber, demanded of the sentry why he had been so lax in not turning out the guard when he heard the noises coming from the waterfront. He then went on to harangue the unfortunate Italian, telling him that we were German officers training on sabotage duties and that he had better turn out the guard immediately. The poor sleepy sentry shouted into the guardhouse and an assortment of ill-attired Italian soldiery emerged and shuffled into line, where Fitzroy gave them a tirade of abuse. Filing past the stupefied guard we left the dock area and hurried back to the Arab quarter and our hideout in 'Downing Street'. On the way, some windows opened, beaming light on us. I poked the Thompson under the occupiers' noses and, just as promptly, the windows shut again. It was almost daylight when we sneaked in through the garage door, to find Johnnie Rose vainly trying to adjust the wheels of the 'Blitz Buggy'. He had discovered that a bent track rod end was responsible for the noise, but was making little impression on a job which was really one for a competent workshop.

Taking our weapons and supplies, we took up quarters on the first floor of the deserted house. David divided up the lookout positions, advising us to catnap when we could. Fitzroy, with his language abilities, was to overlook the main street; Randolph was posted on the stairs, Johnnie Rose and I were in the upstairs back room, while David and Gordon Alston took the front. Soon the awful

truth dawned on us. Our hideout was directly opposite the local German headquarters. Sentries were posted on the pavement only fifty yards away from where we were concealed. David called a conference and decided on the following steps. One, he would go off on a daylight reconnaissance. Two, we would endeavour to effect a repair on the Blitz Buggy, and three, we would somehow leave Benghazi that evening.

David, with a towel around his neck, wearing sunglasses, a polo-necked sweater, corduroy trousers, desert boots, and sporting the black beard he grew in the desert, simply walked out of the front door and disappeared off down the main road towards the harbour. Rose and I went back down to the garage to tinker with the vehicle and achieved some measure of success, although the real test would come that night. Our position seemed, to say the least, to be extremely precarious. To make matters worse, at two o'clock a noise was heard from the rear stairs. Randolph showed his bearded face around the banisters, and an Italian sailor – surprised at finding someone in occupation – ran out through the front door. Fitzroy observed him running straight towards the German headquarters but, on reaching the opposite pavement, he turned sharp right and walked briskly out of sight. Counting our blessings we realized that the sailor was probably on a looting mission.

Shortly after this worrying interruption, David returned via the back door. He had walked right down to the harbour mole and all the way back along the promenade without having been challenged once. He told us that there were two German motor torpedo boats tied up alongside the main jetty which was adjacent to the promenade. His idea was that we could motor past them, throw Lewes bombs into the cockpits and, with a bit of luck, make our getaway without being intercepted. Security in the dock area itself had been tightened up considerably and it was clearly an impossibility for us to place limpet mines on any freighters.

As darkness fell we backed the Blitz Buggy out into the back street with all our kit on board. The engine purred into life and guided by Gordon Alston we drove down towards the promenade. But as we approached the eastern end where the motor torpedo boats were tied up, we saw to our consternation that they were changing the guard. To bomb the boats would have been tantamount to committing suicide. 'Right chaps,' barked David, 'let's get back to the Jebel Akhdar.' So with regret we made our way out of the town and onto the road. The car was still noisy but Rose's work had certainly reduced the high-pitched screech. As a consolation prize we chanced upon a large petrol dump where we deposited our Lewes bombs and the limpet mines for added effect, as there was little point in taking them back with us. On passing Benina aerodrome we had no trouble with the road block and then managed to locate the track leading up the escarpment. As we looked back we could see the black smoke rising from the furiously burning petrol dump. Only a small prick in Hitler's side, but at least we had something to show for our persistence. The following morning we rejoined the LRDG patrol with little more than a humorous tale to tell. We had not been very successful but we had proved one valuable point. If you think of something that the enemy would consider an impossible stupidity and you carry it out with determination, you can get away with it by sheer blatant cheek. We had motored into a large German and Italian occupied port, had stayed there for thirty-six hours and had even carried out a daylight reconnaissance. That was something to be remembered and perhaps repeated in the not too distant future.

After another brief spell at Kabrit we were off again in June to our old stamping ground – the airfields around Benghazi. By this time a group of Free French recruits to the SAS had finished their training and a number of raids were planned in support of a vital convoy that had to get through to Malta.

Reg Seekings and I were to accompany David Stirling to deal with Benina aerodrome which was used by the Germans as a repair base. The original intention was to drive in aboard the 'Blitz Buggy', but disaster struck during the approach to the area with an LRDG patrol. We were motoring along quite comfortably when suddenly a considerable explosion threw us all into confusion. I ended up in the back seat on top of Reg. After disentangling ourselves and checking that no one was injured, we jumped down onto the sand. 'Hold on chaps,' David warned. 'Be very careful where you put your feet. We have hit a cluster of these bloody thermos bombs which are dropped by the Italian Air Force. Don't tread on any suspicious sand mounds.' How right he was. We had driven onto the edge of a batch of small mines which were antipersonnel devices, but this one had blown off the front wheel and messed up the front suspension. Leaving the Blitz Buggy to be recovered later, we carried on to the edge of the escarpment with our friends from the LRDG where we were dropped off.

We were about a thousand feet above the airfield and were able to look down on the coastal plain towards Benghazi. We lay up during the day in a patch of scrub and bushes, making our plans and checking compass bearings for the night approach. David told us that he had laid on an RAF raid on Benghazi that night to act as a diversion, and that this would determine the time of our attack. At last light the three of us, with David in the lead, started to descend the escarpment. This was quite difficult as our way was criss-crossed by numerous small wadis. Slithering and stumbling over the rocks, grabbing hold where we could in order not to break our necks or legs, we managed to complete this section before total darkness fell. We got onto the airfield without difficulty and simply walked out into the middle. Dead on time the RAF arrived over the town and started their bombing runs, while we sat there in the dark. As we were a long way from the main buildings we were able to talk quite

freely about all sorts of subjects. David gave us a long lecture on deer stalking, including methods of getting into position to stalk, the problems of wind and the necessity for camouflage and stealthy movement. Absorbed in his Highland exploits we could forget the job in hand and time passed very quickly.

Glancing at his watch, David brought the lecture to a close. 'Right,' he said, 'squeeze the time pencils. We're ready to go.' We each had twenty bombs and the whole operation only took a few minutes. We crept forward for about five hundred yards when we found ourselves in the middle of a dug-in dump of aviation fuel which was about six feet deep and extended over quite a large area. We left two bombs there so that we would have illumination later, then moved on. Reg suddenly grabbed David by the arm. We all heard the heavy tread of a sentry on the tarmacadam perimeter track between the hangars and the office block. He was ambling along quite nonchalantly and his hobnailed boots gave us plenty of warning. We crouched down and waited until he had passed the hangars and then crept up to the closed doors. Reg and I managed to prise them open rather noisily, but no alarm was given. Leaving Reg outside with his Tommy gun, David and I went inside. As our eyes grew accustomed to the darkness we saw that the hangar was full of German aircraft. Motioning me to go to the right, David set off to the left, and we busily placed our bombs on the Stukas and Messerschmitts that were in there for repair.

I came across a Me110, a large twin-engined fighter-bomber, and had to stand on tiptoe to try to place my bomb on the wing. But David, who was so much taller than I, stole up from behind. 'All right, Cooper, this one's mine. You go into the far corner and fix that JU52.' I reluctantly withdrew my bomb and went over to do justice to the Junkers. We then continued to the second hangar and dealt with more aircraft while Reg discovered a mass of spare aero engines and highly technical looking

equipment. All this accounted for our full stock of sixty bombs. As each weighed nearly two pounds, fifteen were all that could be carried easily, in addition to personal weapons and other kit. Further down the track between the hangars we came across a small guard house and we observed that occasionally the door opened as the sentries were changed. David said that he would give them something to remember us by, and with Reg and myself covering him, he kicked open the door. We saw that the room was crowded with Germans, many of whom were asleep. David calmly bowled a grenade along the floor, saying 'Share this among you.' He slammed the door and jumped clear. The delay was only four seconds and the explosion shattered the guard house while we rapidly made our escape behind the hangars. We never knew what casualties we had caused, but they must have been considerable in such a confined space.

While still behind the last hangar we heard our first bomb go off, to be followed in rapid succession by all the rest. Although all the time pencils had been activated at the same time, there was always a slight difference due to differing acid strengths. Almost deafened by the noise we struggled through a gap in the wire, crossed the main road and scrambled up the escarpment. About three hundred feet up, David called a halt. He confessed that he was not feeling too well, so we sat down and watched the fantastic firework display. The effect was stupendous. The real highlight probably came from the Me110 in the first hangar. When this caught fire, the heat from the burning fuel caused the 20mm cannons to go off spontaneously. Brilliantly coloured tracer shot across the airfield, giving the appearance of an anti-aircraft gun in action. The petrol dump went up and the hangars were ablaze. Complete pandemonium reigned among the Germans on the base. When the real anti-aircraft guns opened fire, it appeared that they thought they were in the middle of an air raid.

As dawn broke we started our climb back to the

top of the escarpment where we were to rendezvous with the LRDG. Looking back across the plain, a huge pall of black smoke was drifting slowly towards the town of Benghazi. The air had grown eerily silent except for the distant shouting of the German firefighters who were vainly trying to extinguish the fires in the hangars. It seemed impossible to us that just three men, carrying only sixty small bombs between them, had created such havoc and destruction.

We all felt very drained after our highly emotional confrontation with the Germans, and it was at this stage that Reg and I realized that David Stirling was suffering from one of his frequent migraine attacks. These were brought on by overwork and not taking proper care of himself, for he rarely slept properly and his desert sores had been left untreated. Reg and I each took one of his hands and we led him, staggering and half-blind, to the top of the ridge. There we crawled into a well-camouflaged position and Reg managed to find a disused well which was covered by a wooden lid with metal hinges. Reg tore this apart and produced wonderful cool refreshing water which revived us all. Shortly afterwards we made contact with the LRDG who drove us back to the rendezvous point for the traditional rum and tea. This did David a power of good and he was extremely elated that we had finally emulated Paddy Mayne on our own.

A couple of days later, Paddy arrived back from his raid on Berka Satellite aerodrome which had not been entirely successful as the garrison was alert and they had been disturbed. David was very keen to show Paddy the havoc we had caused at Benina. As a result of considerable use of his powers of persuasion he managed to borrow a Chevrolet truck for twenty-four hours from the LRDG patrol commander, Robin Gurdon, who reluctantly yielded under constant pressure from David and Paddy. He was to rue that decision later.

The party that set off consisted of Paddy driving, David Stirling in the passenger seat, and me, Reg, Jock

Storey, Bob Lilley and Karl Kahane in the back. The latter was a German Jew who had served in the German Army before emigrating to Palestine before the war and could talk his way through any road blocks. David was adamant that road blocks were unlikely and would, if they existed, only be manned by Italians who would give us no trouble. So off we went to the top of the escarpment to wait for nightfall. We descended by the same route we had taken on the Benghazi trip and motored off along the main road towards Benina in holiday spirits. None of us expected problems. We had not progressed very far when Bob Lilley shouted, 'Look out, sir! Trouble ahead.' Red lights were positioned across the road about one hundred yards away, and as we came to a complete halt we were confronted by a full German road block. Well, this is it, I thought. The barrier extended right across the road in the form of barbed wire on trestles and there was no way to slip round. As far as we could make out from our shielded lights, there were at least twenty Germans in obviously aggressive stance behind machine-guns and Schmeisser machine-pistols.

There was a pregnant pause. Then a *Feldwebel* (sergeant-major) in full uniform came towards us, holding in one hand a large potato-masher hand grenade and in the other a P38 pistol. As he approached, a light from the barricade was focused on Paddy and David in the front seats. We were for it! In the back we had eased the pins out of grenades and were clutching our Tommy guns, ready to spring out of the truck at the first shot.Karl was very quick off the mark. He leaned out of the window and deluged the guard commander with a flood of German. We were on our way back from the front, he explained, were hungry and wanted to get through to Benghazi, so would he please cut out the formalities. The sentry then demanded the password. Karl retorted rudely that this was impossible. We didn't know it because we had been in the desert for six weeks. Luckily for us we had the password for the previous month and the *Feldwebel* seemed

to relax somewhat. Unfortunately at that moment Paddy cocked his Colt .45 automatic and the German stiffened; the rest of us instantly followed suit with a series of clicks. The German NCO must have realized that he would be the first to be gunned down if he tried to detain us. Reluctantly he turned to the rest of the guards and gave the order for the barrier to be removed. Paddy slipped the truck into gear and we drove through, thanking our lucky stars, for there was no way in which we could have won the firefight. We would not return, however. It was probably suspected who we were, for the grenading of their guard house must have put their security system on full alert. They would simply take action to trap us inside the road block.

With the hairs standing up on the backs of our necks we proceeded, knowing full well that we had been rumbled. Ahead, we saw a party of Italians around a flimsy road block, waving rifles to stop us. They had obviously been tipped off by the Germans. A burst from our Vickers dispersed them like rabbits. This brought us to what appeared to be a transport café and filling station that had been taken over by the Italian Army. Some of us jumped out and began fixing bombs onto anything that was of military use. It was nearly half an hour since we had passed through the German checkpoint and it was clearly impossible to proceed any further. There were lights showing on the road behind and a machine-gun was firing warning shots into the darkness. Realizing that we could not use the road any more, Paddy doused the lights and drove back across the desert parallel to the way we had come. As we jolted along we noticed that there was a patrol of vehicles, probably armoured cars, with their lights on who were following and gradually gaining on us. Paddy took the only course open. He switched the headlights back on, increased speed and hoped that the tried and tested LRDG truck would cover the rugged terrain faster than our pursuers. Swaying and bumping wildly we roared over the rough plain until we reached

the wadi which was the connecting road to Regina. We were lucky that we hit it bang on, otherwise we would have been unable to get back up the escarpment. By then we had outdriven the armoured cars and when we were about half a mile up the wadi we knew that we had hit the correct crossing place. Allah was with us!

But not for long. As we started the long slow climb up the escarpment, we had to constantly dismount, push, shove and coax. By the time we surmounted the last ridge, dawn was breaking. The crest and safety was only a few hundred yards away when Bob Lilley shouted from the back, 'Abandon the truck! I've just heard a time pencil explode among our bombs.' I could also smell the fuse burning and knew that we had only ten or twenty seconds before the whole truck went up. I have never left a vehicle more quickly in my whole life. I flew over Paddy's shoulders, bounced off the bonnet and rushed away like a madman. Seconds later the explosion bowled us all over. The truck was blown to kingdom come. Miraculously nobody was hurt; once again, Allah had been generous.

Picking ourselves up and dusting ourselves down, we ruefully examined the brand new and borrowed truck, now a battered and twisted mass of metal on four burning tyres. We realized that flat feet were the only way of getting back to the rendezvous, and David asked me to navigate. We soon met up with some Senussi tribesmen, who were at the time pro-British, and they offered us cool water and dates in the shade of an abandoned well. Considerably refreshed we made it to the rendezvous on time and in due course returned to Siwa. David Stirling was going to have to buy a lot of drinks in Shepheards Hotel in Cairo to atone for the loss of Gurdon's truck. We actually arrived at Siwa on 21 June 1942 to find the LRDG in the process of abandoning the oasis. Rommel was surging on towards Egypt and Tobruk had fallen. The Eighth Army was in headlong retreat back to the El Alamein position, only sixty miles west of the Nile.

5 On our own

On his return to Cairo, David Stirling was made aware of the gravity of the general situation. The Eighth Army was holding a line between El Alamein on the coast and the Qattara Depression to the south, with orders to defend the Nile Delta at all costs. By then our force had been increased to a total of about one hundred trained operatives and the SAS was ordered to harass enemy communications by whatever means possible. Once more, Reg and I joined David and other officers at his brother's flat to discuss plans. Studying the maps strewn all over the floor, it was obvious that the only way to get in behind the enemy was to cross through or around the Qattara Depression. This was an enormous sunken expanse of desert four hundred feet below sea level, roughly a hundred and thirty miles wide. To make matters worse, the surface was either soft mesh-mesh (loose sand) or salt marsh disguised by an apparently hard-looking crust of white salt. The LRDG had previously crossed the Depression and were quite willing to guide us to a place where we could get vehicles down the steep cliffs of crumbly limestone and brittle rock.

David's plan was that we would move off as a unit accompanied by three-ton lorries stacked with supplies. This would make us self-sufficient and able to stay away from base, raiding over a period of weeks. In addition, we had now obtained our own transport and would rely less on using the LRDG as a taxi service. In future we would ride into battle on jeeps, specially adapted for the

SAS role, with twin Vickers 'K' mounted front and rear and often with an additional .5 Browning machine-gun. Water condensers, sand mats, metal wheel channels, radios and ammunition filled every available inch of space on board leaving little room for the three-man crew. Once out behind the lines, we would establish a base and then split into small groups to raid the airfields around Fuka.

In early July we moved off from Cairo in a long column of some thirty-five vehicles, motored up to the Army headquarters behind our lines for David Stirling to confer, and then travelled south to the edge of the Depression. From there it proved possible to navigate along the northern edge and we made our way out into the open desert to establish a base some sixty miles south of the main coast road. There we camouflaged the three-tonners and made the jeeps ready for operations.

Our first sortie was in three vehicles with Paddy Mayne and David Stirling together on a raid for the first time. Also for the first time we were without Reg as he had been sent off back across the Depression to liaise with the workshops in Cairo regarding necessary modifications to the suspensions of our jeeps. We travelled in two jeeps led by Paddy and the repaired Blitz Buggy driven by David. During the day we travelled north and as dusk fell we found ourselves able to look down on the coast road. The sporadic German traffic trickled away to almost nothing as it grew darker.

David and Paddy decided to motor along the road, heading east back towards the rear of the German front line to look for any targets of opportunity. I was the navigator, and if I got it right, we should reach an aerodrome on the seaward side. After some miles of uneventful driving we duly found the target. We halted beside the road to hold a quick 'O' group. It was clear that, after our previous successes, the enemy would place stronger guards on their airfields and we would therefore stand less chance of being able to move in on foot. It

was therefore decided to drive across the road onto the airfield and to cruise down the main runway destroying as many aircraft as possible by gunfire. With the Blitz Buggy in front and Paddy leading the two jeeps we moved off and soon saw an abundance of aircraft silhouetted by the low moon. We recognized them as CR42 fighters of the Italian Air Force, nimble bi-planes similar to the Gloster Gladiator. They were extremely manoeuvrable which made them far more dangerous to us in the desert than the faster Messerschmitts. The latter had difficulty in observing us and could not get down low into narrow wadis. The target was indeed a juicy one.

With all guns cocked we approached the silhouetted aircraft, and as we came alongside the first one, the Vickers 'K's opened up with a mixture of tracer, armour-piercing and explosive bullets. I was manning the forward single Vickers and our rear gunner had the twins. David was encouraging us from the driving seat and we could tell from his voice that he was delighted with the new technique. We progressed at about 15 mph and soon had two CR42s on fire. As the third one burst into flames I saw Paddy jump out of the leading jeep, run across and throw a Lewes bomb into a cockpit. He just could not resist the temptation of doing things in the old way. On the third hundred-round magazine, however, my gun jammed, refusing to fire another round. The problem was that the Vickers was designed for use in aircraft and was therefore air-cooled. With its high rate of fire it would only accept a certain amount of ammunition down its throat before demanding a rest!

By now there was complete confusion on the airfield, yet not a single round was fired in our direction as we recrossed the road and headed back to the south. David asked me to set a course for our base in the Jebel which was some seventy miles to the south-west. After about twenty minutes he stopped and asked Paddy to join him in the 'Blitz Buggy'. 'Cooper,' he said, 'you can drive.' This was the first time that I had been allowed to drive

the great man, though many books written since the war have put me down as having been David's driver. I was in fact his navigator, and I was only permitted to drive when he was too tired himself. While Paddy and David snoozed I drove along with the car compass giving me the rough direction, followed by the two jeeps. As dawn slowly approached we were entering a long wide wadi when I suddenly heard the drone of aircraft approaching from the north. I woke the two officers, warned them, and then surrendered the driving seat.

Minutes later we saw two CR42s flying low on the horizon, which confirmed the fact that we had not managed to account for the whole squadron. From their line of approach it was obvious that either they were following our tracks from the airfield or that they had picked up our dust trails as we entered the wadi. The jeeps immediately fanned out to present as small a target as possible and David headed towards the left-hand side of the wadi where there was a small hill. This was about 150 feet high and stood detached from the side wall of the valley. He thought that if we could run around the back of this feature we could make it difficult for the CR42s to line up their guns on the Blitz Buggy. The jeeps by then were about a mile away and I don't think they had been spotted. David drove round the hill several times avoiding the attentions of the Italian pilots, who then cunningly split up, one coming in from the north and the other from the south. Having already dropped their small bombs with no effect, they then opened up with their heavy machine-guns. David made a dash for the side wall of the wadi, hoping to find a defile to give some protection, but it was not to be. We coasted over the top of the escarpment as they came in. 'Abandon ship!' David shouted, and we ran in all directions as fast as our feet could carry us, diving into small crevasses to seek some protection. As I hit the dirt I heard the roar as the Blitz Buggy burst into flames and exploded, hit by tracer. And then I actually fell asleep!

I woke to find David leaning over me. When I opened my eyes, his anxious face – for he'd assumed I was dead – broke into a broad grin. 'We shall have to get another Blitz Buggy, Sergeant Cooper,' he remarked affably. There was no sign of the aircraft, so I walked forward with David to observe what was left of our coveted possessions. I had lost my theodolite and all the navigation logs, but the most disturbing loss was a document which had been in the glove compartment. This read:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN All assistance will be given to Major Stirling of L Detachment SAS Brigade in the matter of supplying all weapons, armoury and supplies, and the COs of units concerned should quote this letter.

It was signed by Winston Churchill, Field Marshal Smuts, Admiral Cunningham, General Auchinleck and Air Marshal Cunningham. This had been cunningly obtained by David at a dinner party in Cairo!

The jeeps hastened over to our position and collected us up. By late afternoon we were back at the desert base, sad at the loss of the Blitz Buggy but cheered by the news that the RAF reconnaissance had confirmed the destruction of twenty-four aircraft on the ground.

The first joint operation by Paddy Mayne and David Stirling had been a great success, but it was obvious that the Germans and Italians would cotton on to the new method of attack and take the appropriate counter-measures. To change the technique slightly, David called his officers and NCOs together and formulated a plan for a massed jeep assault on Landing Ground 126, which was a British forward strip by then in German hands. The attack would be made by two columns of ten jeeps in each, one led by Paddy and the other by George Jellicoe, who had recently joined us. During the actual raid the box formation would open out to about fifty yards between the two lines. David's jeep

would travel in the centre and slightly forward of the box. The plan was that as he identified targets we would direct the columns to turn on the axis of our jeep and that those movements would be controlled by a Very pistol. I had the responsible position of ensuring that the correct colour flares were used.

With David's usual cheekiness he decided that we would have a trial run using live ammunition. Although we were only seventy miles from the sea and the main road, he felt that a rehearsal was absolutely necessary to ensure that the raid went off without any major hiccups. We practised on an open patch of desert, wheeling to the right and the left and all the time firing the Vickers outwards from the columns. The noise was excruciating and the illumination from the tracer rounds made more than one of us consider that the enemy might well have seen or heard us. It seemed odd to be conducting manoeuvres miles behind the enemy lines.

Everybody then set about the task of preparing for the actual show, cleaning the guns and reloading the hundred-round drums in the right order – one tracer, one armour-piercing and one incendiary. All the vehicles were thoroughly checked and then we were ready. In the dark, the twenty-one jeeps left the base camp with David leading. I was responsible for the navigation and sadly missed the comfort of the Blitz Buggy. Mike Sadler, a Rhodesian who had been a navigator for the LRDG but had subsequently joined us, was at the rear of the column to check on my navigation. The night was relatively bright with a quarter-moon and a fair amount of patchy cloud. I navigated using low clouds and a prismatic compass held in my lap. Normally when travelling in daylight we used a sun compass and checked our dead reckoning with an astral fix taken by theodolite. After about two and a half hours of driving, David asked me for a position. I replied that I thought we were about four miles from the target. He must have doubted my accuracy for he

sent for Mike Sadler who confirmed my dead reckoning.

After another ten minutes or so the ground evened out and we were travelling quite fast. Then, to everyone's surprise, the runway lights came on as an aircraft came in to land. We switched off our engines and listened to the aircraft revving up at the end of the strip as the lights went out again. David turned to me and said, 'Johnny Cooper, I apologize for doubting your navigation. It was spot on.' I walked quietly over to the two column commanders and gave them David's orders, which were to form into their lines as we moved off. The engines roared and we drove onto the perfect surface of the airfield. David took a line straight down the runway with aircraft parked on either side. The blasting began.

It was not long before the whole aerodrome was ablaze. The ground defences had obviously been alerted but they had difficulty as they were using the low-firing Breda, an Italian 15mm machine-gun. With the obstruction of so many parked aircraft they were only able to fire at us in fleeting bursts. At the top end of the runway we turned left and right in a complete wheel and came back down again on another track, still firing. We were almost back at the edge of the field when our jeep came to a shuddering halt. David shouted, 'What the hell's wrong?' I leapt out and threw open the bonnet, only to discover that a 15mm shell had gone through the cylinder head and had then passed only inches away from David's knee in the driving position. As if by magic, Captain Sandy Scratchley's jeep came alongside and he shouted, 'Come along, we'll give you a lift.' I jumped into the back, where Sandy's rear gunner was slumped with a bullet through the head. I eased him out of the way and grabbed the machine-gun as David piled into the front beside the forward gunner. We roared off the airfield in pursuit of the two columns that were rapidly disappearing in the smoke haze caused by the havoc we had unleashed. The scene of devastation was fantastic. Aircraft exploded

all around us, and as we left the perimeter our own jeep went up in a ball of flame – the only vehicle casualty of the raid.

Once clear of the airfield the columns split into small groups and dispersed as far as possible to avoid being seen by aircraft which we were sure would appear at first light. When dawn broke, our little group of three jeeps halted and we camouflaged them as well as we could. We buried Sandy's gunner and waited for the inevitable German retaliation. In the event we got off scot-free, but the Free French patrol who had raided Baghusa airfield further along the coast were not so lucky. They were caught in the open at first light by a Me109 and suffered high casualties in men and vehicles. They had made the mistake of not camouflaging, brushing away their tracks and lying low. In the late afternoon we moved off again and returned to our base, to discover that it had been raided from the air and that several three-tonners had been destroyed. We had to move away to a new location. That night we heard on our radio link that the RAF had confirmed that we had destroyed thirty-seven planes. The operation had certainly been a complete success and David's point had been proved. Clearly our job was to constantly invent new techniques so that the enemy could never predict our operational methods.

The SAS expanded further as a result of these successes. David Stirling was promoted to lieutenant colonel and L Detachment was granted regimental status in the autumn of 1942. In addition to the veteran squadron and the Free French, new recruits swelled our ranks in training at Kabrit – enough to man a complete new squadron. David was also given command of a group of Greek volunteers known as the Sacred Squadron, and the remains of the Special Boat Section under George Jellicoe. With the Germans and Italians in headlong retreat after their crushing defeat at El Alamein, numerous SAS patrols operating from advanced bases

in the desert created havoc along the coast road leading back to Tunisia. In November, Allied forces had landed in Algeria and Rommel was caught between two armies. General Montgomery's last great attack to finally drive the Germans and Italians out of North Africa and to join up with the American and British forces fighting in Tunisia was timed for 15 January 1943.

David left day to day control of the squadrons in the hands of their commanders, having to busy himself with training and administration, but at the end of the year he decided to set out on a last long patrol. His aim was to move across the Hadda Haddak south of Tripoli, country previously uncharted, and then penetrate as far as the Tunisian border, three hundred miles south of the coast. From there his idea was to turn north and try to cut behind the Mareth Line to join up with the First Army in Tunisia. There was a slightly ulterior motive for this trip, as another of his brothers, Bill, had formed the 2nd SAS Regiment in Algeria and the two of them needed to confer. As usual, the patrol was planned in Peter Stirling's Cairo flat, and David envisaged that it would be our last trip before the Germans were thrown out of North Africa. Mike Sadler (who had been sent back from operations in the desert) and I were to be the two navigators, and also included in the party was a most peculiar major named Wilfred Thesiger. He dressed as an Arab, was a fluent linguist and had just returned from work with tribes in Ethiopia, Eritrea and British Somaliland.

With Eighth Army headquarters already at Bouerat on the Gulf of Sirte, we had a long drive from Egypt, but from then on we were in new territory. We headed due west across the land mass south of Tripoli, the maps for which were completely blank except for lines of latitude and longitude. Intelligence had produced Italian air surveys for us which stated that parts of the Hadda Haddak were impassable for motor vehicles. In the event, these surveys proved to be completely inaccurate. From there

our plan was to hit the Tunisian/Libyan border, a risky business as we had no prior intelligence of enemy dispositions. The reason for taking two navigators was that if we were successful in penetrating behind the Mareth Line, one would return to guide British forces in a left hook to outflank the defensive position.

The first lap of our approach was uneventful apart from one humorous incident. I was setting up my theodolite one night to take a star sight, when Major Thesiger came along and said that he would like to learn about astro-navigation. From then on I gave him a series of lessons and also set up my planisphere at the local hour angle to show him the planets and stars of the first magnitude which were so useful in taking our fixes. A few days later we halted for the night in an area of sand sea with the dunes running favourably in our direction. I had finished my night fix and turned in when Thesiger prodded me awake. 'Sergeant Cooper, I've seen it! I've seen it! You must come with me,' he shouted enthusiastically. I asked him blearily what he had seen but he refused to tell me until we had climbed a certain sand dune. I followed him in some perplexity and mutely trudged the hundred and fifty feet to the summit. Exhausted, but gasping with excitement, Thesiger pointed to the south. 'There it is, Sergeant Cooper,' he cried triumphantly. 'The Southern Cross.' I could barely suppress my laughter as I told the major that he was looking at the constellation of Capella. I explained that at latitude 30°N it was impossible to see the Southern Cross. Great disappointment crossed his face as he muttered his apologies. We skidded back down the slope without further word and returned to our respective beds.

As we moved west the going was the best we had ever experienced – fine smooth hard-packed sand. North of the oasis of Ghadames, David decided to set up a base camp under the command of Thesiger, leaving behind a quantity of food, water and supplies. A Free French patrol was with us at the time with the mission of

passing through the narrow Gabes Gap on the coast and the Eighth Army was asking for raids in the area. David decided to abandon his idea of outflanking the Mareth Line and to go for the direct route through the Gap.

We set off again on 22 January, heading north towards Lake Djerid, a large area of salt marsh quite impossible to cross by vehicle and which narrowed the passage between it and the town of Gabes on the coast. David decided that bluff was the answer and that we should use the main road. As dawn was breaking our party of five jeeps, with accelerators pressed to the floor, raced for the Gabes Gap. We passed slap through the middle of a German armoured division dispersed on either side of the road along several miles. The tank crews were savouring their first cups of coffee and stretching themselves in the early morning sun. Many of them looked at us curiously but we just stared back and motored on. By then we thought that our bluff had succeeded and, after another five miles all mixed up with enemy units on the move, we decided that enough was enough. We left the main road and headed for some hilly country covered with bushes and small trees in which we could camouflage ourselves and hide. Climbing up into an area of steep ravines we dispersed the jeeps under cover and started to prepare a well-earned meal. It was by then about ten o'clock and we completed the work of camouflaging and dusting off our tracks as the usual precautions against being spotted from the air. David said that we ought to have someone up on the high ground above us to keep an eye open, and as Mike Sadler and I wanted to fix our position, we both volunteered.

Climbing out of the wadi in which we had made camp we slowly ascended to the highest point visible to us and at the top we slid forward with binoculars, compasses and maps to establish our position. Looking down south-east towards Gabes we saw the metalled road awash with military traffic all heading east towards the front. There was little movement in the other direction. At one stage we saw two vehicles climb the track up into the escarpment and stop. This did not at the time seem suspicious and we assumed that the soldiers had paused to relieve themselves. We did not suspect that this was a reconnaissance group from a German paratroop battalion which had been ordered to search the area as suspicion had been aroused by our driving along the road earlier that morning. At about one o'clock we returned to the others, gave David Stirling a full report, and retired to our beds.

We had not been relieved while up on the summit and after the previous forty-eight hours of hard slog none of us was in a position to be vigilant. This was to be our tragic mistake, because at about three o'clock I was awakened by a kick on my feet. I looked up. Standing at the foot of my 'bed' was a fully equipped German parachutist with his Schmeisser sub-machine-gun slung loosely across his chest. He motioned me to stay where I was and then disappeared around the corner, breaking into a run. He was joined by another German and they continued their fast exit out of the wadi, obviously to report that they had found us and to bring up reinforcements. I leapt out, woke David and explained what had happened. He ordered me to tell our signaller, Ginger Tatton, to immediately destroy all our signal logs and codes. Then we heard the first shots from the other part of our patrol as the enemy moved in. David shouted that it was every man for himself. Mike Sadler, Freddie Taxis and I, accompanied by the two signallers, ran uphill into the narrow defile in which our wadi ended. At a fork, the two signallers turned right and the three of us left, until the defile opened out towards the top of the escarpment. David had disappeared in the opposite direction. This was the last I was to see of him until his release from Colditz at the end of the war.

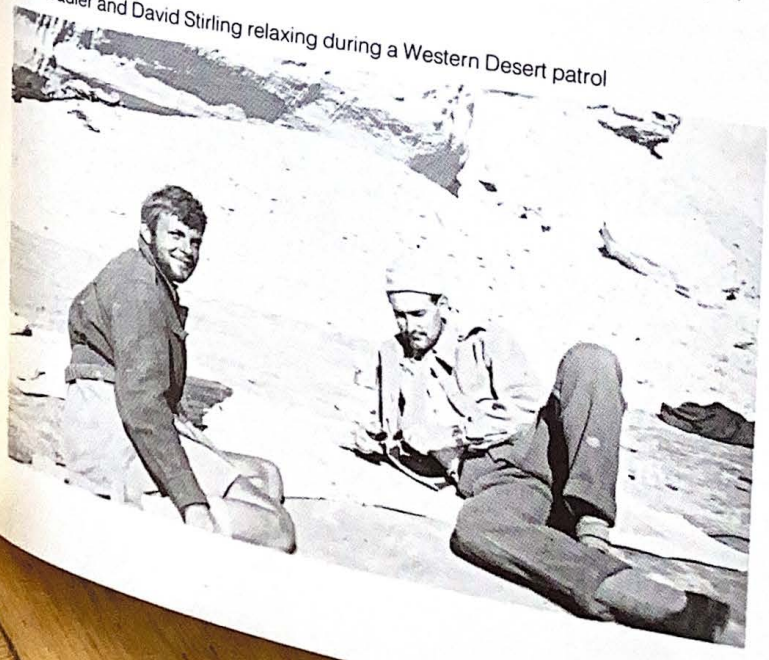
We realized that if we ran any further we would be in open ground, so finding a slight depression about

three feet deep covered at one end by camel scrub, we dived into it. Lying there panting with exhaustion we were somewhat dubious about our chances of escaping. By then we could hear continuous firing and could see the Germans moving in down the wadi from which we had just escaped. I whispered to Mike, 'What the hell's the German word for surrender?' He replied that it was 'Kamerad' and it looked as though we were about to use it. We heard a scuffing noise on the rocky surface. Cautiously I peeped out of our hiding place – and came face to face with three or four rough-looking goats munching at our little bush! It seems humorous now, but at the time we were neither of us in the mood for laughter. We were soon surrounded by a whole herd of the smelly beasts and we saw an Arab shepherd who seemed to be keeping his flock around our hideout – purposely or not we never knew. Only minutes after the timely arrival of the goats we heard German soldiers running down the hill left and right of our funk hole, not suspecting that the animals were our mobile camouflage.

We sighed with relief, but dared not move for a while yet. Stiff and cramped as we were we realized that we were still in danger. After about half an hour the goats slowly moved away and we were able to take stock of our position. We heard the rounding-up of the rest of our patrol and the Germans driving our vehicles away. Our situation was not enviable. All we had was a 1:1,000,000 map and a compass. We were without water and food. There were two courses of action open to us. One was to walk back towards the Eighth Army, but to do that we would again have to contend with the Gabes Gap which was swarming with enemy soldiery. The other possibility was to move north and west in the hope of meeting up with the French Foreign Legion who had taken the oasis town of Tozeur on the north bank of Lake Djerid. We opted for the latter course, and as night fell we crawled out of our hole. With Mike leading we moved off north-west hoping to get away from the vast enemy concentrations,

Some of the Originals. *Back row left to right:* Rose, Austin, Seekings, Catell, Cooper; *front row:* Rhodes, Baker, Badger

Mike Sadler and David Stirling relaxing during a Western Desert patrol



Johnnie Cooper *(left)* and Reg Seekings *(right)* as newly fledged sergeants

From left to right: Seekings, Rose, Colonel Stirling and Cooper in the Blitz Buggy

ewly fledged sergeants

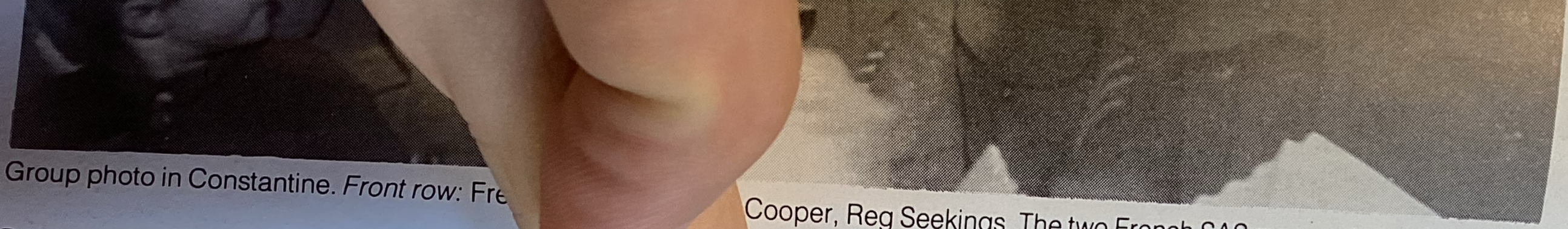
and Cooper in the Blitz Buggy

Johnnie Cooper,
navigator,
taking the noon sun sight
assisted by Ted Badger

Paddy Mayne
in the desert

Group photo in Constantine. *Front row:* Freddie Taxis, Johnnie Cooper, Reg Seekings. The two French SAS men are behind

Desert version of the jeep, modified for SAS, 1942. Note twin Vickers K at rear, single Vickers and 0.5 Browning at front, and water condenser on front bumper. (A. Kemp collection)



Group photo in Constantine. *Front row:* Fre

Cooper, Reg Seekings. The two French SAS men are behind

Desert version of the jeep, modified for SAS, 1

kers K at rear, single Vickers and 0.5 Browning at front, and water condenser on front bumper. (A. Kemp collectio

right:
Author's jeep with two crew members in a German farmyard

Citroën used by the Maquis;
FFI stands for Forces Françaises l'Intérieur

A Squadron of

A Squadron of
armoured
jeeps in
North Germany
1945

Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver Brooke, CO 10th Yorkshire Parachute Battalion (TA); author in right-hand background

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Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver Brooke, CO 10th Yorkshire Parachute Battalion (TA); author in right-hand background

but several times we had to change course to avoid passing through German camps.

At dawn we holed up on a flattish escarpment without any enemy vehicles in sight. In the distance we could see the salt lake shimmering white in the sunlight. About five hundred yards below us we could see a small Arab camp. The French soldier, Freddie Taxis, spoke Arabic, and he told us that it was considered good luck according to the Koran to approach an Arab encampment early in the morning as strangers. They would be obliged to offer hospitality. As we came near to their tents their guard dogs set up a continuous barking until we stopped in front of a party of tribesmen who had emerged from the tents. They looked quite fearsome in their long robes and beards. Freddie burst into Arabic, telling them that we were fleeing from the Germans and were on our way to Tozeur. We were given dates, bread and an abundance of water, and on leaving they presented us with a small broken chatti (earthenware water jar) which contained about a pint of water. Judging by the permanent look of their camp, they were a more domesticated tribe than the usual nomads and seemed reluctant to allow us to leave so quickly. However, we trudged on until we were so exhausted that we decided to lie in what shade we could find before the sun became too unbearable.

We spread ourselves out and, finding the odd patches of shade, fell into an exhausted sleep. At about four o'clock in the afternoon I was rudely woken to find myself looking into the business end of a 12-bore shotgun. At the other end was a very angry looking Berber tribesman. He started to shout at me, gesticulating wildly while keeping the gun pointing at my midriff. Freddie, woken by the noise, started to speak to my assailant in Arabic and shouted to me in English, 'He wants your clothes.' We had been warned by Intelligence that the Berbers would strip any escapee, especially pilots who had baled out. As it was winter, I was wearing battledress and a leather jerkin, so reluctantly I threw the jerkin towards

him. More faces appeared above the ravine and I was quickly surrounded by ten children who came running over the skyline throwing stones at me. They started to close in, apparently with the intention of stripping me of everything I possessed.

One stone caught me on the left forehead just above my eye and the blood streamed down my face making me virtually blind. I really thought in that instant that I had been badly hurt but there was no time to bother about first aid. How was I going to break out of this one? I then heard Mike Sadler shout, 'Run this way, Johnnie. Protect your head with your arms.' I blindly took off, running as fast as I possibly could until I bumped into Mike and Freddie who had joined forces. They grabbed my hands and the three of us ran together down the hill. Once out of range of the robbers, they applied a field dressing to my head which stopped the flow of blood. This enabled me to see again and take stock of our position. With our limited resources there was nothing for it but to carry on and endeavour to make contact with the Foreign Legion within the next twenty-four hours. We marched all that night and I was in great pain. My head wound obviously needed stitching.

By early morning we had left the hilly country behind and found ourselves in a flat and arid landscape of almost white sand and salt. The sun was burning hot and our eyes hurt, but shimmering in the heat haze we discerned what appeared to be palm trees. Could this be a mirage? In fact we were right on the edge of Lake Djerid and the pools of water reminded us that we had not had anything to drink since five o'clock the previous evening. Much against our better judgement, Freddie tried to quench his thirst by scooping up the salt water and rinsing out his mouth. Unfortunately he must have swallowed quite a bit, for he became violently sick and broke down completely, simply lying on the sand in sight of the oasis. We told him to stay there and that we would come back for him as soon as we could. Mike and I carried on towards the trees which by

then had become convincingly real. When we were about five hundred yards away we heard intermittent rifle fire and occasional bursts from a machine-gun. 'Oh God,' I said to Mike. 'This must mean that the Germans are still fighting the French for possession of Tozeur.' But given our situation, there was nothing for it but to go forward even if it did mean being taken prisoner.

At last we reached the shade of the palm trees and followed a muddy track deeper into the oasis until we came to a water course. As we bent down to scoop up the water, some kindly looking old Arab gentlemen appeared carrying chattis full of delicious cold water which they offered to us. They also foisted sticky dates on us. After a few minutes of sitting down on the track surrounded by the Bedouin, we heard the sound of running feet and round the corner came a French soldier, obviously of Senegalese origin, carrying an ancient rifle with fixed bayonet. On his fuzzy head was perched a traditional French pattern helmet. In broken French we told him that we were British and that our comrade was in a distressed state just a few miles back beside the lake. The soldier disappeared magically whence he came, and a few minutes later a French sergeant with a huge ginger beard and a great grin on his face came rushing down the track, followed by a gaggle of coloured soldiers. With superb efficiency he dispatched a patrol to pick up Freddie and made us rest until our comrade arrived.

When the patrol returned with Freddie supported between two Senegalese, we walked slowly along the track until it opened out on to the finest *Beau Geste* fort I had ever seen. The whole scenario reminded us of a film set: the palm trees, blue sky, strange uniforms and the brilliant white paint of the fort. Out of the entrance strode a captain, the garrison commandant. We were ushered inside and in no time at all a medical orderly was stitching up my head and food in plenty was produced, including not a small quantity of white rum. The meal consisted mainly of potatoes and goat meat,

but to us it was a banquet. I think that by the time it was over we were all in an advanced state of inebriation. Having had virtually nothing for three days, it was indeed a magnificent feast. Language was no problem, as Freddie, by then fully recovered, chatted away to the French captain. Signals were sent back and forth from the nearest headquarters, which was an American unit at Tebessa, some two hundred kilometres to the north. The signal sent by the French was quoted to me:

'Today three gentlemen from the English Army arrived at my location, Tozeur, having escaped arrest by the Germans at the Gabes Gap, and we commemorate the meeting of the glorious British Eighth Army with our forces here in Tunisia. One is a French sergeant and two are English sergeants, names and numbers as stated.'

The confusion in the American headquarters can be imagined! They had little or no knowledge of SAS deep penetration missions as they had never been involved in the desert campaign. They therefore disbelieved this information and, suspecting us of being agents, sent a patrol to arrest us at Tozeur. They did, however, inform General Alexander at his headquarters in Constantine. At the time, of course, we were unaware of all this, but during the late afternoon an American armoured patrol arrived to collect us. We must have looked a motley crew; my head was swathed in bandages and all our feet had been similarly treated as we were covered in blisters from our march across the desert. The Americans were most uncivil while trying to handcuff us, and bundled us into an armoured car with soldiers guarding us. Without any nourishment whatsoever we were driven through the mountains to Tebessa. The pass where we stopped to relieve ourselves was sprinkled with snow. On arrival, the Americans had red faces, for confirmation had arrived from Generals Alexander and Mark Clark that we were indeed members of David Stirling's SAS patrol. Cairo had confirmed our names and numbers, and somewhat reluctantly our American captors began to fête us with canned substances of all types. To our chagrin, though, there was only Coca Cola to drink and no beer!

We stayed the night in Tebessa and, in contrast to our arrival, the next morning we were moved in far more luxurious transport to Constantine where we were to be debriefed about our penetration of the Gabes Gap. Mike Sadler was immediately flown back to Cairo to take on the job of navigating 7th Armoured Division around the south of the Mareth Line, the old French defensive works guarding the Tunisian frontier. I also said farewell to Freddie Taxis who went back to the French Army. I was taken to the operations room at American HQ and, after being congratulated by Mark Clark, was questioned closely about our operation. One incident I remember was when I was explaining about the Gabes Gap and how everything had to funnel through the narrow strip between the coast and Lake Djerid. An American Air Force general kept saying, 'Goddamit, everything has to go through that goddamed gap,' and then turned to one of his staff and said, 'Just bomb that goddam gap.'

One piece of very good news that I received was that Reg and his patrol had managed to get round Lake Djerid and would soon be joining us. I was ordered to report to Bill Stirling's 2nd SAS Regiment at Philippeville in Tunisia, but not before Reg and I had some terrific fun in Constantine. We found ourselves in trouble, though, after one particularly liquid lunch.

In Cairo in winter, standard dress was battledress with the khaki shirt collar outside. In the First Army area, however, they buttoned their battledress up to the throat. As Reg and I sauntered down the main street, some American MPs accosted us and said: 'Do up your goddam necks.' Reg replied that we were both sergeants of the Eighth Army and that that was our accepted tradition. After much wrangling we were hauled off to the cop shop where the headquarters was informed. To our

delight the Yankee police were told to mind their own business by the American authorities, who said, 'You are dealing with a couple of Limey heroes.' From then on we were left undisturbed to celebrate in peace.

When Reg and I reported to Philippeville, Bill Stirling asked us to go on an operation with Popski's Private Army. This unit was the creation of Vladimir Peniakoff, a Russian *émigré* with Belgian nationality who had wangled a commission in the British Army. He had raised and led a small raiding force which had operated in the desert and which had then followed our route through to Tozeur. We reported to their camp at Bône, not far from Bizerta, where we met the famous Popski. He told us that he intended to cut the railway line which ran between the German and Italian areas south of Tunis. The plan was for the patrol to move round the southern flank of the Americans until we passed through the screen of armoured car patrols mounted by the Derbyshire Yeomanry. Then we would turn east and head for the railway, hoping to destroy as many culverts, bridges and stretches of track as possible.

Our experiences with 2nd SAS and Popski made us realize that we were in a totally different environment from that commanded by David Stirling. Operations were regarded in a completely different light and we found that their operational thinking was characterized by extreme caution. Although David's boldness had led to his capture at Gabes, the fact remained that many of his raids had been successful and we felt that such tactics should be continued. Popski's patrol was modelled on our lines but they had no experience of this type of operation.

I was to be the navigator, and after we left the Derbyshire Yeomanry positions we set off in an easterly direction. Our slow rate of progress annoyed Reg and myself, as it was a case of stopping every four or five miles, hull down, searching with binoculars before proceeding. We wasted hours and hours on useless precautions which left us open to air and ground observation by the enemy. It was just as well that the Luftwaffe had been more or less shot out of the sky, although they still had some low altitude Fiesler Storch aircraft which had to be reckoned with. These were small single-engined high-wing jobs which they used for spotting from the air. After days of this cautious approach to our target we sighted the road and railway. As we looked down at the track from a hill, Popski observed an Italian infantry battalion coming towards our small patrol in an extended line. Reg and I decided that there was no joy in that for us and that it looked like an about turn. Reg reckoned that our slow approach had been picked up by the enemy.

Although we were motorized and they were on foot, we were in a completely untenable position. There was no way in which we could inflict any damage and Popski gave the order for us to turn back. Having taken days to get there, and with the light fading fast, he shouted to me to take the lead. With Reg driving on dimmed lights and me navigating, we set off at a cracking pace and were back with the Yeomanry at four o'clock the following morning. I am afraid that Reg and I were completely disillusioned by that type of operation, infused as we were with David Stirling's methods. When we got back, to our relief we found that a signal had arrived ordering us to be flown back to Cairo. In a much happier frame of mind we boarded an aircraft at Constantine to return to our 'native' Kabrit.

In the meanwhile, Paddy Mayne had assumed command and was reorganizing the Regiment. We were to move to Nahariyya in Palestine and prepare to take part in the invasion of Sicily. I heard that David had in fact escaped from the initial capture, but had been retaken when trying to walk back to Eighth Army lines. On arrival I was greeted by a lot of my old buddies who told me that I was off to Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU) to be turned into an officer. The fact was that David had commissioned both Mike Sadler and myself in the field. As far as Mike was concerned, he belonged to

the Rhodesian forces and his promotion was acceptable. Things were different in the Brigade of Guards and field commissions had been unheard of since the First World War. David's action had caused red faces at Middle East HQ, so while Mike kept his one pip as a second lieutenant, off to OCTU I went. The irony was that when we met up again on our way home to England, I had collected two pips on account of my previous service.

My departure for officer training really marked the end of my first period of service with the SAS. Reg and the rest of the regiment went on to see action in Sicily and Italy. Many of those who had survived the desert campaign were eventually killed or wounded, but I took no part in operations during the autumn and winter of 1943 owing to my absence for retraining. I had by then reached the great age of twenty, had been awarded the DCM and been mentioned in dispatches. Since my arrival in the Middle East as a teenager I had survived a lot of experiences which most men at that age would not have had the chance to sample. In addition, I had been trained by Jock Lewes and David Stirling in the principles of small-scale raiding operations and their emphasis on the use of the three-man patrol.

6 The return to France

By the end of 1943, plans for the Allies to invade France were well under way and included an important role for the SAS. All the units were to be brought back to Britain and formed into a brigade under the auspices of HQ Airborne Forces. 1st SAS Regiment sailed home from Algiers at Christmas 1943, and Mike Sadler and I were flown back to start setting up the organization. On our arrival in Glasgow, Mike settled down to establish a basis of an Intelligence section and I set off for the small village of Mauchline in Ayrshire to form a reception committee for the advance party.

Initially our task was to establish a campsite at Mauchline, but as we got down to work we were informed that we were to move to a more remote village called Darvel. This is situated to the east of Kilmarnock, surrounded by hills and wild moorland. It was obviously selected for its distance from the Ayrshire towns and the availability of excellent training grounds right on the doorstep. When we arrived we discovered that the squadrons were to be accommodated in disused factories. They were old spinning mills and were very spacious as all the machinery had been stripped out. The first job was to make the factories habitable, provide beds and bedding and organize the somewhat primitive ablutions. Each squadron had its own individual office and rooms for the training staff. A sergeants' mess was established and the officers moved into an old manor house overlooking the village. We got everything ready on time and even had the leave passes made out, for the whole regiment was

to have two weeks' free time on arrival. Many of the men had not been home to see their families for upwards of three years.

When everybody returned from leave, we all settled down to a series of conferences about our future role in Europe. It was clear that many of our operational techniques would have to change as we would be moving from the open ground in the desert into densely populated areas of occupied France. There were three main tasks assigned to the SAS. First, the gathering of intelligence, secondly the training of resistance movements and thirdly, acts of sabotage against the Germans. It was naturally assumed that we would parachute into the areas in which we would be operating.

At this point, the regiment was receiving large reinforcements of officers and men, all of whom were volunteers from all sections of the army. Operations had taken a toll on all ranks during the fighting in Italy and we had to be brought up to full strength. Among the new arrivals was our first padre, the Reverend Fraser McLuskey. One evening I was sitting in the officers' mess with Paddy Mayne, who had invited all the newly recruited officers to share a glass of beer with him. A barrel was installed by the mess staff and I was ordered to act as barman. We all sat around in a circle and Paddy started to question them about their experiences of active service and their backgrounds. This was followed by detailed questioning of individuals who, when they were finished with, were told to go to bed. After the last one had gone, Paddy turned to me and said, 'Johnny, take down the blackout boards.' I said, 'But sir, what about the air raid precautions?' The reply I got was, 'Don't be so bloody silly. It's daylight outside now.' At that moment there was a banging on the door and Paddy told me to go and see who it was. I opened it, and outside stood a tall figure dressed in padre's uniform, collar and all. He said that he was Captain McLuskey, reporting for

duty with the 1st SAS Regiment. Paddy shouted across to ask who it was and I repeated the padre's words. 'Well Johnny, bring him in. Pull him a pint of beer.' McLuskey entered and I handed him his pint as ordered. Paddy then said, 'It's time for breakfast, Padre,' and clutching our tankards we entered the mess dining room, much to the astonishment of the staff.

After about a fortnight, Paddy sent for me and told me that he had selected me to be Air Liaison Officer. My job was to co-operate with the RAF in retraining the veterans from the desert who had only learned to drop from the doors of an aircraft. In Britain, parachuting was carried out from hatchways in the floor of the fuselage and standard bombers were used – Stirlings, Halifaxes and Albemarles. After a briefing from Harry Poat, our second-in-command, I moved to the aerodrome at Ayr to commence my new duties. The first conversions were to be made from an old Albemarle, as none of the larger types could be made available for training purposes. This could only take nine parachutists and was hardly ideal for our purposes. It had originally been designed as a twin-engined light bomber but on early operational flights problems with the wings were discovered which made it very dicey to dive. The exit area was called the 'bath tub' because of its shape, and was situated in the belly of the aircraft. The parachutists would sit on a ledge above this hole and, when given the signal to go, would slip off and push themselves through the gap. If we had had our full equipment it was doubtful if an Albemarle could have accommodated more than four or five men.

When I arrived at the airfield, I was introduced to Squadron-Leader Freddie Archer. I was immediately impressed with his prompt co-operation and he told me that he was delighted to be of assistance to our regiment. He had personally heard of our exploits in the desert and that our tally of over three hundred enemy aircraft destroyed on the ground made us something of a legend. Squadron by squadron and troop by troop, those who had

not jumped from floor apertures arrived for a one-week course during which they carried out one daylight and three night jumps. Freddie Archer approached me one night in the mess and said that many of his officers were keen to parachute but that the RAF had forbidden this. He suggested that volunteers might dress in Army kit, helmet and smock, and jump out with the SAS boys. Of course I said that it was very much against the rules and regulations, but on many a night there was an extra member of the group – or in parachuting jargon, the stick – to experience a jump in the dark. This strengthened the comradeship between the Albemarle crews and the SAS.

For our intended drops into France we had a standard operating procedure for collecting the stick on landing. All stick members on hitting the ground had to first bury their parachute or conceal it, stay in position and keep quiet. Once the stick commander, first to jump, had disposed of his parachute he would walk back on a bearing supplied by the pilot before leaving. Then he would start blowing a bird call whistle which was supplied. When the others heard this they would blow their whistles and hold above their heads a glass ball which was illuminated from the inside by phosphorus. In this way a stick could be gathered together without a lot of shouting.

The equipment of an SAS man jumping into France in 1944 was quite complicated. His parachute was fitted on the back and opened by a static line fixed inside the aircraft. On his chest he carried a Bergen rucksack containing his personal clothing plus anything needed for immediate survival on the ground, and on the right leg was a scabbard for the rifle or carbine. The stick commander had the additional load of one or two pigeons in a special container, in case of a failure in radio communication. Once the man had jumped, he released the Bergen which was lowered on a cord to dangle ten feet below. In the rucksack was a small two-band radio receiver which could be tuned into a special BBC broadcast from which instructions could be passed

on from headquarters in England. Each stick commander had a call sign, and mine was SABU-9. I also had (and still have) an identification letter in French and English signed by General Leclerc of the Free French.

It was at about this time that we became aware of the fact that we had become part of the Airborne Forces set-up. A brigade was formed, consisting of the two British SAS regiments, two regiments of Free French parachutists and a company of Belgians. We had been ordered to replace our sand-coloured berets with the dark red Airborne ones, but at least we were permitted to retain our cap badges. We also had to wear the Pegasus sign on our battledress. A certain amount of jealousy seemed to exist, stemming from the fact that we had been involved with so many successful operations. Although few of the Airborne people had much in the way of operational experience, they tended to look down on us as poor country cousins and thought that their professionalism overshadowed our private army outlook. A further bone of contention concerned the wearing of operational wings on the left breast. The right to such a distinction was earned by three operations behind enemy lines and had been granted to us by the King – so we carried on wearing them. There was a lack of communication from higher up the chain of command which caused ill-feeling among the veteran members of the regiment. We were made aware that we had been incorporated into the larger world of the Army and were no longer a small independent outfit able to go more or less our own way.

After the parachuting courses we got down to serious training, mostly at night. I was officially posted as a troop commander in A Squadron, commanded by Bill Fraser, and the other troops were headed by Alex Muirhead and Johnny Wiseman, all veterans of the desert. It was at this stage that I was reunited with Reg who became Squadron Sergeant Major and who was one of the most highly decorated NCOs in the British Army. We were to remain together until the termination of our

European adventures. Harry Poat took over as second-in-command to Paddy Mayne, and others from the days in the desert were Tony March, John Tonkin, Roy Close and of course our one-time CQMS, Jerry Ward. He was promoted lieutenant and quartermaster to 1st SAS. As the squadrons took shape, a rivalry was born which has continued through the history of the SAS via Malaya, Oman, Borneo and even the Falklands. As the months went by our techniques improved, our training became more solid and the new recruits were gradually integrated with the old hands. This was no mean achievement as some of the old timers proved awkward when dealing with inexperienced and often older soldiers.

One night, Paddy Mayne announced that it was time for the L Detachment boys and other desert wallahs to have a night out in Glasgow. He told us that everything had been arranged. We were to travel in by three-ton trucks and beds had been booked for us at St Enoch's Hotel. There were ten or so of the original desert officers, plus those who had been promoted from the ranks, and we proceeded to take over the bar. Chatting away about old times and sinking our pints, we noticed that a Lieutenant-Commander RN had walked in, a submariner who sported the same decorations as Paddy – a DSO and two bars. What a meeting! Following the commander was his entire officer complement from the submarine which had just returned from patrol in the North Atlantic. We talked about the fortunes of war in North Africa and Italy, and the naval officers gave us an insight into the hazards of their job. It all ended in the early hours when the hotel ran out of beer. For my part, I cannot remember going to bed.

Towards the end of May the training and the waiting was over. The whole regiment moved south to Fairford in Gloucestershire, where for security reasons we found ourselves virtually imprisoned on the airfield. D-Day, 6 June, and incidentally my birthday, was to mark my

return to active operations. Reg and I were to lead the advance party of A Squadron whose task it was to set up a base in the Morvan area of France, between the Loire and the city of Dijon. There we were to arm and train the Maquis and harass the Germans wherever possible. This was known as Operation Houndsworth and was only one of several similar missions which involved both the British SAS regiments as well as the French and Belgians. We had been told that we would have to drop blind if the lights or bonfires of the reception committee could not be found, and do our best to make contact with the Maquis. In no way would we be returned to Fairford.

That night we lined up outside our Stirling bomber, the Australian pilot of which had just completed thirty missions and was over the moon at having been issued with a new aircraft. We stuffed ourselves and all our equipment inside and were quickly airborne, circling over southern England until we joined up with a bomber stream that was making for the Ruhr Valley in Germany. Both Reg and I had intercom sets so that we could communicate with the captain. As we passed over the coast, some excitable naval vessels loosed off spasmodic anti-aircraft fire at us but shortly afterwards we were over France at 9,000 feet on a black miserable night. When we were over Orleans I heard the pilot instruct the navigato that they were leaving the bomber stream and turnin south, reducing height at the same time. The weather got worse and the pilot told us that he would probably have difficulty in finding the DZ (dropping zone). He started to circle around and from the open aperture we could at times discern large lakes and rivers but hardly anything else. After about ten minutes of this the pilot came through again and said that he could not find the reception committee but that he could guarantee to drop us within twenty miles of the DZ. Reg and I had a conference and we decided that he should drop right behind me, so that if anything happened, one of us would be able to pick up the whole stick and carry on with the mission.

I told the pilot that our static lines were all hooked up and we were ready to go. Seconds later, on came the red light above the open jumping hatch, quickly followed by the green. I found myself whirling in the slipstream and felt the comforting jerk as my parachute opened. The pleasant sensation did not last long. I realized that I was in the middle of driving rain in a black cloud with not another parachute to be seen. Looking down, I tried to make out the ground to prepare myself for landing, and received one hell of a bang. I reeled over and must have lost consciousness, I can't say for how long, but when I came to I was lying in a ditch all tangled up in my parachute and with water running over me. I stood up and saw just above me a dry stone wall which I must have hit. I disentangled myself, freed my entrenching tool and dug a hole in the ditch. Luckily the ground was soggy and in ten minutes I had a hole deep enough to bury the parachute.

Gathering my shattered senses I took out my compass which I had previously lined up on a bearing given to me by the pilot, and had a look around. Through the driving rain I could see a farmhouse to which the wall was connected. I must have almost landed in the yard. So I started to walk back on the compass bearing and, after about a hundred and fifty yards, found myself on the edge of quite a dense forest. I began my bird calls and took out the white ball as I walked in through the trees. There was no reaction at all, and in desperation I shouted at the top of my voice, 'Reg!' In reply I heard a distant, 'Johnny!' from the side of a hill a long way off the line I had been taking. I had in fact been walking away from the stick. Taking a bearing on Reg's call, I scrambled through the undergrowth until I found him climbing out of a tree. As he buried his parachute we had quite a laugh at our misfortune, and when he was ready we set out in search of the others. Lady Luck must have been on our side that night, for by dawn we had collected the entire stick and nobody had suffered any injuries. In

fact, I was the only one who had landed on *terra firma*. All the others had ended up in trees. When all the parachutes were disposed of and the Bergens collected, we checked our revolvers and carbines and settled down to a welcome brew of tea, prepared on our little cookers – wondering where the hell we were.

As we drank our tea the rain subsided into drizzle and then stopped altogether. Moving to the edge of the forest overlooking the valley and the farmhouse which I had nearly hit, we could just see the tip of a very big lake. Looking at the maps we considered that it could have been Lac Séton, but we could not be sure as the whole area was dotted with lakes of a similar size. We set up the radio, and Corporal Danger, our signaller, passed my coded message back to headquarters saying that the party had arrived intact but that we were unsure of our position. Then the sun came out! Reg and I decided to carry out a recce of our immediate area, but before setting out we released the pigeons in the hope that they might get through to base. We wrote our coded messages on very thin rice paper and enclosed them in the capsules which were fixed to the pigeons' legs. Each bird was given a bit of water and a small amount of corn, then, holding them above our heads, we let them go. To our amazement they dropped back down to the ground and started to peck away at a ploughed field on the edge of the forest. Reg swore like hell and rushed after them, flapping his arms and shouting to get them airborne. Finally they took off and headed over the horizon towards England, but we were never informed of their safe arrival.

We tuned into the BBC on our correct time schedule, but as there were no messages for SABU-9 we decided that there was only one way to find out where we were – ask a Frenchman! Accompanied by Sergeant Vaculik, our Yugoslavian interpreter who also spoke French and Russian, we approached the farmhouse on top of which I had nearly landed the night before. We knocked on the door which was opened by a wizened old lady. She

seemed to suspect that we were Germans and sent for her teenage grandson who at once recognized our uniforms. We told him that we were looking for the Maquis Jean, at which he brightened considerably. His suggestion was that we should return to the forest and wait until he contacted us.

Later in the day the boy returned and said that something could be arranged for that night. The commander and one other should go to the rendezvous point to be scrutinized by the Maquis and establish our identification. So we spent the remainder of the day resting, checking our kit and making radio calls. At dusk, the boy collected Reg and me and led us down the valley until we came across a third rate road. At a junction the boy left us with instructions to hide in a ditch until the Maquis arrived. After about two hours we saw headlights in the distance and heard the chugging of an engine. Both Reg and I were concerned in case we had been given away and it was a German patrol coming to pick us up. We got ready to make a run for it, but lo and behold, along the road came a thirty-seven seater bus propelled by a noisy gazogène wood burner strapped onto the rear. It came to a grinding halt and on the roof we made out the silhouette of a man with a Bren gun. Out of the door tumbled ten assortedly dressed and armed Maquis who surrounded us with obvious suspicion. The leader stepped forward and asked in French for our identification. I produced the letter from General Leclerc which he hurriedly scanned with the aid of a torch and then said in excellent English, 'Marvellous. Where are your companions?' I replied that they were about a half a mile away and that Reg could go with some of his men to collect them. Whilst waiting, we sat in the bus and chatted about the invasion and the latest news. You can imagine the surprise on the faces of the rest of the stick when they arrived at the rendezvous and saw our method of transport.

The trip took at least an hour, which proved that the navigator of our aircraft had been spot on as we were

only eighteen miles away from our destination. We left the bus beside another wood and continued on foot along a wide track into the forest. When we finally reached the campsite, out came the wine and a sumptuous meal was prepared. Tucking into vast portions of meat and potatoes we were surrounded by grinning Maquis trying to communicate in French and broken English. We were located in the Morvan just to the north of Château Chinon, an area of forest and steep hills which was an ideal hiding place for the Maquis. Having eaten our fill, we settled into our sleeping bags and drifted off to sleep. The following morning the Maquis showed us the location of our own bivouac area and told us where we could get wood for cooking and drinking water. It was impressed on us that we should only cook at night, as smoke rising through the trees during the daytime was an invitation to the Luftwaffe. Apparently the only danger from German attack would be on a dry windy day. In such conditions the enemy would surround parts of the forest and fire in incendiary mortar rounds hoping to ignite the undergrowth and drive out those hiding within.

We spent the day in sorting out administrative matters. Several of the radio operators left us for other locations, while we got down to marking out a dropping zone for our first incoming supplies, and later, for the rest of A Squadron. The Maquis were most anxious to receive a parachutage of arms and ammunition, and we told them that we would do our best. At a long conference with their leader, he told us that he had selected two DZs which he considered suitable for the dropping of containers but not for personnel and our armoured jeeps. All this was very different from what we had been taught to expect during our training. Reg and I went to view the sites and we selected one which, although very uneven, was the most suitable. It was a long deep valley about four hundred by one hundred yards completely surrounded by forest. It sloped down gently, and diagonally across it was a track which we could use for clearing the supplies. This

first drop would consist entirely of containers, and we had ordered Bren guns and ammunition plus mortars, explosives, mines and hand grenades. We then discussed the lighting of bonfires with the Maquis people and I pointed out that if it rained we would be in trouble. I asked them to provide two twelve-volt batteries with old car headlamps attached for extra illumination.

After that we all retired to get some sleep as the aircraft was due to arrive at one-thirty in the morning. At one o'clock the Maquis started to kindle their bonfires, keeping them well damped down in view of possible German recce aircraft. I took up my station at the top end of the DZ with an S phone, which was a ground-to-air radio set which would enable me to talk to the crew of the aircraft. At approximately 1.40 a.m. we heard the dull groan of a very heavy aircraft and minutes later this huge plane flew over the DZ at about 1,200 feet. We immediately illuminated the headlamps and the Maquis poured petrol on the fires, heaping on dry brushwood. The aircraft disappeared towards the south and then we suddenly heard the noise of the engines returning. It flew once over the DZ, circled around the north and came in at about 900 feet spewing parachutes. As it was a clear night we were able to spot parachutes which drifted into the trees. I was unable to get in contact with the pilot and gradually the noise died away.

Immediately we all got to work feverishly collecting up the containers which were extremely heavy indeed. Each one needed six men to move it, and after we had detached the parachutes we assembled them in the centre of the clearing. Finally we managed to locate all twenty-four of them, and then, to my amazement, along the track lumbered a fantastic spectacle. Six carts each pulled by two oxen came to a halt beside our pile of containers. Their speed was only about half a mile per hour but the strength of the huge beasts was an education. The actual carts consisted of a boom connected to eight-foot-diameter wheels and with V-shaped wooden

sides, obviously designed to transport containers. In a slow procession, with each driver perched on top, we moved off the DZ and into the forest. I will always retain a deep admiration for those oxen drivers who by day worked normally on their farms with the Gestapo breathing down their necks. Yet at night they were prepared to risk the threat of retaliation against their families in order to work for the Maquis. Unarmed, they were great patriots and deeply anti-German.

In the weeks that followed the rest of A Squadron parachuted into different locations in the area. Johnny Wiseman's troop landed north of Dijon, while Alex Muirhead's troop and Bill Fraser with Squadron HQ arrived near to us. All of us were waiting with great anticipation for the arrival of our jeeps which were to be dropped in later. The Maquis, better armed and equipped after the parachutage, were spoiling for a fight, which was not long in coming.

We received information that the German force based in Château Chinon was conducting a thorough cleanout in our area and was taking hostages from the many villages which were co-operating with Maquis Jean and others. This particular unit comprised mainly Russian troops serving under German officers and NCOs. In the village of Montsauche they took five hostages and intended to cart them off to Château Chinon for interrogation, a fate from which the Maquis intended to rescue them. It was therefore decided to lay an ambush on the road leading out of Montsauche along which the prisoners would have to travel. The place selected was an excellent one as there was a gentle incline which meant that large lorries would have to change gear and slow down. On the western side was a deep forest and on the opposite side of the road were open fields. Just after the incline the road turned right and disappeared out of sight of any vehicles climbing the hill. Just round this bend, Ian Welstead, with a small section, strung thin steel wires across the road, secured to trees at about

the height of motor-cycle handlebars (we had been informed that such convoys invariably had at least two motor-cycle outriders). Back down the slope a stack of timber which had been cut for pit props would provide cover for the bomb men who would attack the first lorry carrying troops. Each side of this pile of timber, and deeper into the woods, the Maquis established a well-camouflaged firing line. In the fields on the other side, Alex Muirhead, Reg and myself positioned ourselves with Bren guns commanding the road below, which constituted a marvellous killing ground.

The signal for a general opening of fire would be when the motor-cycles had passed round the bend and the Maquis had thrown their plastic bombs at the leading truck. We lay in wait as the afternoon dragged on, and at about half-past four we received word that the convoy was just leaving Montsauche. We had about ten minutes before the action would commence. From my position I observed the two leading motor-cyclists come up the slope and disappear around the bend to be clobbered by Ian Welstead. At the same moment the first three-tonner crammed with soldiers drew level with the wood pile and over came two plastic bombs. One hit the bonnet and the other the rear of the vehicle. Pandemonium among the occupants. Many were killed by fire from the Maquis as they fled across the road towards the open fields. Our Brens opened up with devastating effect and many of the Russians retreated back to the ditch, which was in Reg's sights. It was a massacre. Three trucks were set on fire, the hostages were released unharmed from two civilian cars, but the German light vehicle bringing up the rear managed to turn round and make off.

The Maquis swarmed out of the wood, collecting up what German weapons they could, and taking a badly wounded Russian back to their camp. We made off as quickly as possible and waited for the inevitable reprisals. Shortly afterwards, half the village of Montsauche was burnt to the ground and the mayor and the *curé* together

with eleven others were shot. Their bodies were thrown into the church which was then set alight. There were also a number of cases of rape. We interrogated the captured Russian through Vaculik, our interpreter, and his story proved to be extremely interesting. He claimed that he had been taken prisoner at Stalingrad, starved until he agreed to volunteer for security tasks in France, and that his case was hopeless. The Maquis would probably kill him but, if not, he would be shot as a traitor back in Russia. As he was dying of his wounds he implored us to dispatch him rather than hand him over to the French for further indignities. We carried out his wishes with a swift clean bullet. Had I been in similar circumstances I would have wanted the same.

For some while after the ambush near Montsauche we moved into a security and vigilance period, expecting reprisals against our positions by the irate Germans at Château Chinon. We searched the whole area looking for a new secure base camp. In due course the Maquis moved their camp and we found a very secure place nearby. As we became more independent and self-contained, we became increasingly wary of the Maquis' security, for Maquis groups were often infiltrated by informers in the pay of the Milice, the French paramilitary police units who worked with the Gestapo. By this time both myself and many of the old desert hands were finding this form of close warfare very different from North Africa where we could see our enemies from a vast distance. We found ourselves transported to the dense forests of France where we could stumble on the enemy only yards away and thus we had to be constantly on our toes. A further problem was the ease with which enemy aircraft could catch us in the open by swooping over the hills and down into the valleys, giving us little chance to melt back under the trees. It was not a matter of claustrophobia on our part but rather a complete reversal of our tactical desert training and standard operating procedures.

During this period we had managed to select a suitable

dropping zone for the arrival of our first jeeps, which would be flown over to us slung under the open bomb bay doors of a four-engined Halifax. The actual jeep was packed into a wooden cradle with air bags underneath to cushion the impact with the ground. Four parachutes were needed and were attached to static lines anchored in the aircraft. When the radio message came through to confirm the flights, we made ready to receive our transport. The first Halifax arrived and scored a magnificent delivery right bang in the middle of the DZ. Within minutes of the package hitting the ground we had removed the parachutes, opened up the cradle and pushed the jeep under cover. As the second Halifax arrived, also spot on target, we noticed with horror that the cradle had become detached from the parachutes. The jeep, cradle and all, came hurtling down onto the DZ making a terrifying noise. We scattered in all directions, except for our signaller. He had his earphones on and failed to hear the missile descending. He almost died of fright when the jeep plunged into the ground only thirty yards from where he was crouching. At least we did not have too much trouble disposing of the wreckage. On impact the jeep made such a crater that all we had to do was to shovel it in. The third jeep, however, was another perfect delivery and by dawn we had cleared the DZ and driven our two new fighting machines back to our camp. One thing we noticed at this drop was that the parachutes disappeared into the Maquis camp. Like us they were using the material for tents and sleeping bags, but a lot of them ended up in the local villages either for sale or as gifts to girlfriends. Quite a cottage industry developed, producing silk underwear for the local population.

We could now consider targets that were at quite some distance from our base. Ideally we were looking for something that would make a significant dent in the German war effort, and the Maquis told us about a synthetic petrol factory located just south of the cathedral city of Autun. Synthetic fuel was essential for the

German Army as they had no reserves of their own. The Allies had bombed the Ploesti oil field in Romania, thus eliminating a valuable source of supply for the armoured divisions fighting Montgomery in Normandy.

Autun lay some forty kilometres from our camp and the Maquis provided a guide who would take us to within a mile of the place. The aim was to launch a mortar attack at night to set the processing plant on fire. One problem was that the factory was situated above a mine which produced some of the raw materials needed. This was worked by Frenchmen. If we set alight the installations above ground there was the danger that hundreds of miners might be trapped below to die for lack of oxygen. We did, however, discover that the night shift stopped work at 2 a.m. and the next crew came on at 4 a.m. This gave us a period of one and a half hours in which to mount our attack. Captain Alex Muirhead was with us in A Squadron and was an expert with mortars. He had been a great asset during the defence of Termoli in Italy. We sorted out the bombs we would need; smoke, incendiary and HE (high explosive). Reg and I travelled in one jeep and Alex took the other with his crew.

Motoring down to Autun was quite uneventful. We used minor roads and when we had to cross a main road we would stop and reconnoitre, not moving across until we were quite sure that there was a break in the traffic in both directions. Arriving at the selected site near the plant, we opened a gate and drove the jeeps into a five-acre field which was slightly higher than the actual target. There was a slight amount of moonlight, enough to enable us to see the towers and tanks of the factory. We set up the mortar in the field on its heavy baseplate and lined it up. Alex set the sights while we primed the bombs, and then we sat down to wait. At around twenty minutes past two we opened fire. The first two bombs were smoke, as the force of the explosion of a three-inch mortar pushes the baseplate into the ground, necessitating adjustment of the sights. The two smoke bombs

landed quite near the target, and after Alex had applied the necessary corrections, we stuffed twenty incendiary and HE bombs down the tube as fast as we could. Over the range of about 1,000 yards, there were five bombs in the air at one time.

The Germans were caught completely by surprise. They must have thought it was an air raid because we heard the whine of a siren from the factory and ack-ack guns started to fire into the sky. By the time the last bomb left the tube, the factory was ablaze and the sky was lit up by flaming petrol. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, we quickly dug out the baseplate and loaded all traces of our presence into the jeeps. When we drove away, closing the gate behind us, the only signs of our action were the hole left by the baseplate and our wheel tracks. We assumed that the Germans never knew what happened. Perhaps they put it down to inside sabotage. We motored back, arriving just before dawn, and later we heard that the plant had blazed for four days. With very little effort on our part we had managed to destroy an important source of fuel for the German Army.

Life continued, with the mounting of road and rail watches, and radioing the results of our observations back to base. An added complication was the presence of escaped aircrew who were brought into our camp by the Resistance. We passed them south onto the escape network, but at one time we had eight of them which caused quite an embarrassment. They had to be fed and because of their different nationalities and ranks, clashes were inevitable. All clamoured to be got back to England as fast as possible. On the other hand, some of them, mainly the air gunners, volunteered to help us on operations, manning the Vickers 'K' with which they were conversant. Some were reluctant to help out with camp chores while others mucked in with enthusiasm.

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The next affray was quite a small one and we were only a contributing factor. There was a Maquis group nearby who had received information that a combined force of Gestapo and Milice backed up by Cossack cavalry intended to attack their forest camp from the rear. This Maquis group were very short of arms and ammunition and other groups were often reluctant to part with their supplies. So we arranged to move over to this particular bunch to organize a parachutage for them. We stipulated that only Bren guns, magazines and ammunition were to be flown in in a few containers. A complete drop might have alerted the enemy to the fact that the Maquis had been resupplied.

The drop took place with great accuracy, and on receiving twenty-five Brens we gave the French gunners a crash course, choosing the more intelligent ones to be Number Ones. The Number Twos were given hours of practice in changing and refilling magazines. We then retired into the forest to leave the Maquis to deal with the Milice. As luck would have it, the line of approach chosen by the enemy ended up at a farmhouse at the end of a long winding track. From this farmhouse the ground rose steeply on both sides of open fields until the edge of the forest was reached. The French sited their Brens on both sides of this defile looking down towards the farm. Just after dawn we heard the drone of heavy transport and four or five lorries parked by the farmhouse in a line, spewing out the Milice and their Gestapo leaders. Through binoculars we could see the blue berets and white bugle cap badges of the Milice and some German officers at the rear who were obviously organizing the attack. They formed up into groups of between five and ten men, not really bothering to spread out tactically and advanced up the open ground towards the edge of the forest. As they got to within two hundred yards they were met by a hail of .303 rounds from the Brens. The result was absolute slaughter. The Maquis were screaming and shouting as they mowed down their

hated fellow-countrymen and even managed to set the leading vehicles by the farmhouse on fire. We quietly retired, leaving a happy Maquis cleaning their guns and celebrating their victory.

After a further week of road and rail watches, I received instructions that I was to move to the north of Dijon and join Captain Johnny Wiseman at a place called Is-sur-Tille. This move entailed crossing both the canal and the main Dijon to Orleans railway line. Reg and I together with a small group decided to try to find a route to take the troop across. The night we chose was moonlit and there was good visibility up to one hundred and fifty yards. On arrival at the canal we approached with a view both to finding a crossing place and sabotaging it. Moving slowly along the bank we at last came to a set of lock gates which proved to be closed. Creeping up stealthily we found that there was a broad walkway with a handrail across the top. This was all painted white, and for anybody on the other side waiting in ambush it would be a sure killing ground. Leaving our two other men on the southern bank of the canal, Reg and I crossed the gates and continued on for another five hundred yards where, according to our maps, we should find the railway line. In fact, we almost stumbled into a deep cutting and at least thirty feet below us lay the shining tracks of the main Orleans-Dijon line. We decided to recce along the railway and we were both glad that we did so, for suddenly we heard talking in the distance. Moving up carefully we discovered a small sentry-box with two armed guards outside, smoking and passing the night in idle chatter. I whispered to Reg that this must be one of a line of posts along the track to ensure security against Maquis sabotage. We then decided to turn in the opposite direction to discover the distance between this sentry post and the next one. This was to enable us to discover the ideal crossing point and a possible place to plant explosives. We moved east for nearly a kilometre in the moonlight before we saw a replica of

the first sentry-box, also with two guards. It was thus obvious that it would be no problem to get across the railway and that if we sabotaged it in the cutting we could be covered by lookouts at the top. By then it was almost dawn and we quickly slunk back across the lock gates, having a quick look at the sluice mechanism. This was so huge that a massive charge would have been needed to destroy it, and anyway, the railway track was the priority target.

Back at the base camp I briefed the entire troop and we decided that we would move north the following night. As darkness fell we said goodbye to the rest of the boys and set off on our journey to meet up with Johnny Wiseman, indulging in a bit of railway demolition on the way. When we arrived at the lock gates, we slipped across in pairs at two-minute intervals. As there were only ten of us, this took only a matter of minutes and we soon reached the top of the railway cutting. Posting sentries, Reg and I descended to find the best place for explosives.

There are a number of ways of blowing up a railway track. The one frequently described is to place a fog detonator on the line which sets off the explosive underneath when touched by the wheels of a locomotive. If the saboteurs, however, lay the fuse line on the inside of the rail, the flange of the first wheel will often cut it, thus aborting the explosion. Another disadvantage of this method is that a detonator stands out against the shiny surface of a rail. Reg and I therefore decided to dig under a sleeper chair and locate a pressure switch attached to a piece of wood. The slightest pressure would then set off the main charge buried between the two rails. If we were lucky, the explosion would throw the locomotive, tender and hopefully some of the coaches off the tracks. In case no locomotive passed in the night we attached a two-hour time pencil to make sure of at least damaging the rails. When we had finished we dusted away all traces of our handiwork and, calling in our sentries, set off again

through the night. We had only been marching about an hour and a half when we heard a dull rumble behind us. Looking at my watch I realized that it was not the time pencil, so we must have got a train, but we never did find out exactly what had happened.

We made the rendezvous with Johnny Wiseman's group and moved into his camp near the village of Is-sur-Tille. Today, this is a large town with a French Air Force training base and bombing range; when I visited it thirty years after the war I failed even to locate the forest in which we had been hiding. Johnny's camp was totally surrounded by bramble thickets. To get in we had to crawl through a tunnel about a hundred feet long cut through the briers. Inside was an ideally situated camp, with most of the men living in tents made from parachutes. Our contact was with the Maquis Jacques who were extremely efficient and had a sophisticated warning system. They had a direct telephone line to the main switchboard in Dijon which was manned mainly by girls who were members of the Resistance. We were thus notified immediately of any German search columns moving in our direction. In addition to this, if we ventured out of camp, before entering the small hamlet below us we would check the washing line in the garden of the first house. If a pair of blue trousers was hanging there we would know that there were Germans or French Milice in the area.

The majority of the members of Maquis Jacques were ex-soldiers, many of whom had escaped from prisoner of war camps. Their discipline was excellent, and as the Germans retreated new recruits were constantly arriving. One day a patrol from the Maquis found dumps of black-market sugar cached in several places at the side of the road leading to Dijon. Following the trail they arrested a man in the act of offloading a further dump. He was brought back into the camp and put in front of a court-martial on a charge of collaboration and acting against the interests of the Resistance. The sentence was

death. I was detailed to attend the execution as a British officer representing General de Gaulle. This was carried out in the traditional manner with a firing squad of twelve uniformed men armed with a variety of rifles. In charge was an officer with a sabre. The condemned man refused a blindfold and started to sing the Marseillaise as he was tied to a tree and a target was pinned to his chest. Then the officer in charge lowered his sabre and the firing squad did their duty. This incident was an indication of how tough the French could be against their own countrymen. I felt numbed at the speed of French military justice but reasoned that there were so many of their fellow-countrymen benefiting financially from the Occupation and betraying members of the Resistance, that drastic measures had to be resorted to. The episode certainly did not linger in our minds for long.

During our period with Maquis Jacques there was one particularly comical, or perhaps I should say not so comical, event. We were awaiting the arrival of a parachutage one night and heard the aircraft approaching. But before we could get our fires going, the lights on a small railway station in the vicinity were switched on. To our horror, the Halifax circled away to the north and dropped the entire consignment of arms along the railway line, obviously having mistaken the station lights for our DZ. When dawn broke we observed a crowd of Germans busily collecting up the containers and parachutes, and driving them off to Dijon. Afterwards we did have a good laugh about it, but Maquis Jacques were not so amused. Nevertheless we soon managed to arrange a fresh supply drop.

I have mentioned previously that we frequently helped Allied aircrew who had been shot down. One particular man I remember well. He was the pilot of an American P.38 Lightning who was strafing a railway train when one of his engines was hit by anti-aircraft fire. His aircraft caught fire but he managed to pull it up to sufficient

height to bale out before the whole thing disintegrated. He landed in the middle of a very small field and must have imagined that he would spend the rest of the war as a prisoner. Much to his surprise, however, up drove Reg Seekings in one of our jeeps, bumping across the field. The pilot, whose name was Bill, raised his hands above his head, fully expecting Germans to jump out and arrest him. He was extremely bewildered when Reg said, 'Jump in, sir, but we'll take your parachute as well. We can't let the Krauts have that.' He said to Reg, 'Are you Limeys?' to which Reg replied that we had a small detachment in the forest and would look after him. Bill assumed that we had somehow broken through from the south of France and had never heard of the SAS.

Bill was an excellent character. He had completed some thirty missions as escort for the Flying Fortresses on daylight bombing raids over Germany and had been shot down on the first of what he termed a 'Dolly run', attacking communications. He got stuck into everything with gusto, whether it was kitchen duties, cleaning weapons or even going out on night patrols with us. But after about ten days, he told me that he wanted to try to rejoin the Allied forces and get back into the war before it was all over. I asked him what he needed in the way of supplies and he said that he would like some civilian clothes, a bicycle and a little food. I contacted the Maquis and they arranged for a bicycle to be stolen that night from a shop in Dijon. I provided Bill with a brown polo-necked sweater that my mother had knitted for me and which had arrived on a previous parachutage, a compass, some French money and a haversack of hard tack rations. Reasonably well kitted out, Bill said farewell one morning and cycled off down the narrow twisting lane towards the village.

We always gave airmen who had passed through our camp letters for home, plus telephone numbers and addresses for them to contact our relatives. When I returned from France, my mother showed me the

pullover that I had given to Bill. He had managed to get through quite easily and, God bless him, had visited my family from his base in southern England to let them know that I was alive and well. No other letters or contacts were received by my parents. They were, however, aware that all was well with me from handwritten letters sent by our commanding officer, Paddy Mayne. I still have the letter which he wrote telling my parents that I had parachuted into France and at the time of writing was fit and well. Paddy wrote these letters as a sideline, in addition to the enormous workload of running the regiment. I think it was the latter that drove him to parachute into France to join us.

During our time with Maquis Jacques we had all sorts of strange things dropped into us. One item was an interesting tyre burster shaped like a flat cow pat. We used to place these in potholes on the roads in the hope that German convoys would go over them at night, and to our amazement, they worked. The poor Germans, extremely nervous and always expecting to be ambushed by the Maquis, would leap out of their vehicles and fire away in all directions at absolutely nothing when our bursters went off. In the end though, they got wise to these noisy devices and simply climbed out and changed wheels.

By the end of August, our area was becoming swamped with German troops, streaming north through Dijon in retreat from the Allied armies that had landed in the south of France. Our forces in Normandy had also broken out and were heading for Paris. The fleeing Germans were trying to avoid being caught in a trap between the two Army groups. It was at about this time that I had an amusing and exciting experience. I was sitting in a café in the village, having a skinful of wine with Sergeant Jack Terry, when information arrived that a party of retreating Germans were in the place. We had parked our jeep at the back of the café so that it could not be seen from the road, so we tumbled out and

headed back to camp, having had a delicious meal and perhaps a little too much wine. As we approached the road junction at the bottom of the village, we observed two German vehicles parked outside the other café on the corner with soldiers loitering around them. At about 30 mph we turned right at the junction and gave them two magazines of Vickers 'K'. The plate glass windows shattered, the trucks were severely damaged, and we roared off after the one sustained burst. I don't think that we killed many Germans but we certainly put the fear of God into them. The Maquis Jacques could not stop talking about it for ages.

By the beginning of September we found ourselves with far too many Germans around us, which severely hampered our ability to mount stealthy operations. We were ordered to break out and move towards Orleans which had just been liberated by the Americans. There we were to make contact with SAS Headquarters and prepare for evacuation back to England to take part in further operations elsewhere. Our role with the Maquis was coming to an end.

Jack Terry and I had acquired a small Peugeot ten-horsepower tourer. At first it did not take to our high octane petrol, having been accustomed to running on all sorts of dubious spirit in wartime France, but we managed to get it into good running order. This car formed part of the convoy of jeeps and assorted civilian vehicles which was to take A Squadron out of the Morvan. Using side roads we dodged through the lines of retreating Germans, and the first indication of Allied troops was an American military policeman on point duty at a junction south of Orleans. He could hardly believe his eyes as we drove up. Our vehicles were loaded with a motley crew dressed in various uniforms and clutching Bren guns as we had some Maquis with us as well as a few German prisoners. The MP was so dumbfounded that he waved us through.

We then drove on northwards until we arrived at

the aerodrome which we discovered was packed with Liberator aircraft, flying not bombs but sacks of flour to feed Paris. Reg, in his usual enterprising manner, went off and contacted the base commander, and in conversation discovered that the man was a weapons fanatic. He asked Reg if it would be possible for him to acquire a Bren gun, to which Reg replied that this would certainly be no problem. 'How about flying us back to Britain?' asked Reg. Again this was no problem. The American said that he had Liberators full of flour coming in the following morning and that they would be returning empty. We were welcome to climb on board. Reg donated the Bren together with magazines and ammunition, and, as an afterthought, threw in the civilian cars as well.

The next morning the flight of Liberators duly arrived. We had been informed by radio that 1st SAS Regiment was to regroup at Nettlebed in Hampshire, quite near to the Army Mental Institution. We clambered on board in parties of about five per aircraft and took off for the squadron's base in southern England. I sat up in front with the pilot and suddenly it dawned on me that Middle Wallop would be the nearest airfield to where we wanted to go. The pilot was quite willing to drop us off there and instructed the other pilots to follow him in. We called up and were given permission to land, but on our approach the control tower began to get quite overheated. What we had failed to realize was that Middle Wallop was a grass field. You can imagine the consternation as six four-engined Liberators landed, dropped off a sordid looking bunch of people, and – carving great ruts in the earth – roared off again! We got a lot of stick from the RAF station commander but when he realized who we were and where we had come from, the blow was softened. We were home!

7 The end in sight

Still somewhat unpopular with the RAF, we were collected from Middle Wallop and driven to a camp at Nettlebed. This proved, however, to be our home for only a few days, as we were then ordered to move to a new base near Chelmsford in Essex. We found ourselves located at Hylands Park, the seat of the Hanbury family, and Lady Hanbury herself was still in residence in part of the nineteenth-century mansion. Before settling in, though, we were all given two weeks' leave. I went off home to Leicester and there met several members of the 1st Airborne Division. They were very disgruntled by the fact that the speed of our advance across France had caused the cancellation of several planned operations in which they should have taken part. They were jealous of the fact that we had seen so much action and that we wore the medals to prove it. One morning towards the end of September, however, I observed a mammoth air armada heading towards the Continent. Although I did not know it at the time, it was the division heading for Arnhem. The whole sky was full of towed gliders and transport aircraft. I thought to myself that the boys had got their wish for action at last.

My leave came to a speedy end and I reported back to Hylands Park. I was amazed at the size of the estate with its acres of beautiful grazing land and woodlands. The whole area was surrounded by a high stone wall and a back gate led to the charming village of Writtle, complete with green and duck pond. The front entrance was on the main A12 London to Chelmsford road. Together

with the other officers, I was billeted in the main house; the enormous bedrooms could accommodate ten of us in each. Lady Hanbury was a most interesting and exciting person. Although in her late sixties, she busied herself with work for St John's Ambulance and other charities. She was often invited by Paddy Mayne to visit us in the mess, and would sit there holding court, swirling her long string of pearls and telling us young men her stories of travels all over the world. She had a great sense of humour and accepted our presence with tolerant hospitality, considering that we were swarming all over her house and land. She regarded it as 'doing her bit' towards dethroning 'that man Hitler'.

Down among the trees there were dozens of Nissen huts to accommodate the squadrons and the administration offices. Captain McEwan, our motor transport officer, issued us with new jeeps and I was officially appointed as officer commanding, No.1 troop, A Squadron, with the rank of captain. The new jeeps were more sophisticated than the ones we had used in the desert and in France. Both the driver and the front gunner had armoured perspex screens in front of them which allegedly could stop a .303 bullet. Each section of the troop had three jeeps. One of them had a .5 Browning at the front and twin Vickers at the back. The other two were armed with twin Vickers front and rear, with an extra single Vickers for the driver.

We soon got back into training, although through the autumn and winter of 1944–45 all the regiments of the SAS Brigade were more or less unemployed. After our successes in France during the summer had helped the Allied forces in their victorious advance, the front line settled down into static warfare along the German border and in Holland. There were few opportunities for the type of mobile operation in which we specialized, and we would have had to cope with the problems of a hostile population. A whole series of operations were mooted

and just as rapidly cancelled, although a few small parties were dropped into Holland.

It was not until March 1945 that British and American forces finally established themselves along the banks of the Rhine, but with the end of the war in sight there was work for us once again. A Squadron of 1st SAS Regiment was to be attached to a strong force from 2nd SAS Regiment commanded by Colonel Brian Franks. We were to cross the Rhine and act as a spearhead to collect intelligence about enemy troop movements for the forces advancing into Germany. This was not to be a parachute operation. Instead we would cross the river with our jeeps carried in amphibious vehicles known as Buffaloes. After a thorough series of briefings from Brian Franks we were sent over to Belgium in tank landing ships and motored to a rendezvous near Brussels. Our crossing of the Rhine was to be made at the German town of Wesel on 25 March 1945, the day after Field Marshal Montgomery's main assault over the river, and we would then advance towards Osnabrück and Lüneburg. We would be acting in support of units of the 8th Parachute Battalion and the Inns of Court Regiment. The latter was an armoured car unit equipped with Daimler vehicles armed with six-pounder guns.

The actual river crossing was quite uneventful and when we reached the eastern bank the airborne division had already advanced many miles deep into Westphalia. We caught up with a detachment of 8 Para who had been pinned down by a small group of Germans on a hill overlooking their position. When given a taste of our massive firepower, the Germans promptly surrendered. After this came a series of short sharp engagements with the enemy, but nothing in the way of a stand-up fight. We did not have everything our way, however, and Blakeney and Blythe were killed. We drove on northwards through Münster and into the badly bombed city of Osnabrück. Later, in the small town of Celle, we were confronted by a terrible sight. The Germans had been attempting

to move concentration camp inmates by train when an Allied bombing raid caused the guards to panic. They opened fire on the crowded station platforms, slaughtering hundreds of defenceless people including women and children.

While still trying to come to terms with this atrocity, we were ordered to move to the nearby town of Bergen Belsen, the location of the camp to which the victims of Celle were being moved. Although we did not know it at the time, Belsen had been crowded to four times its original capacity. As the Germans retreated from both the west and the east, they moved concentration camp prisoners to avoid them falling into Allied hands. More than sixty thousand had been crammed into Belsen where they were dying daily by the thousands of typhus and typhoid. A limited form of local armistice had been agreed with the German Army authorities in the area to protect both the civilian population and the respective armies from contamination. We were selected to go to the camp because of our high degree of mobility. We were all rapidly inoculated against these diseases and issued with yellow armbands to prove our non-aggressive role while Belsen was evacuated by the Germans and taken over by the British Army.

Arriving at the camp, we motored down one side of the perimeter which was screened by tall evergreens, successfully hiding the horrors within. When we reached the main gate we were confronted by what looked like a normal military base with well-tended flower beds and whitewashed kerbstones. To guard the place, the Germans had left a large contingent of Hungarian and Romanian auxiliaries who patrolled both inside and outside the perimeter. Our mission was to enter the camp to establish the medical requirements and to prepare for the arrival of Army and Red Cross medical teams. We were met by an SS officer by the name of Kramer who introduced himself as the administrative officer. He seemed most willing to oblige and declared that he was

not responsible for the condition of the inmates. He was later hanged in Hamelin Prison after a British war crimes court had established his guilt beyond any shadow of a doubt.

Once inside we realized the vast size of the camp, and I will never forget my first sight of the inmates. Ostensibly they were living human beings, but to me, the men, women and even children were just walking skeletons. When they realized that we had come to liberate them, some managed to find enough energy to swarm towards the barbed wire which contained them. In fact, in their joy, some impaled themselves on the barbs without any apparent registration of pain. Moving on, we then discovered a whole series of communal graves, consisting of trenches about a hundred yards long and twenty feet deep, which were being steadily filled with naked skeletal bodies. Lime was casually thrown over them, presumably to try to contain the danger of infection.

We stood aghast! We simply could not comprehend how it was possible for human beings to treat their fellow men in such a brutal and heinous way. I walked into one of the barrack huts, a long low wooden affair which was crammed with bunks one on top of the other in four tiers. Many of the bunks were occupied with dead bodies, as the other inmates had been too feeble to pull them out for burial. One man I was able to speak to was a Belgian journalist who said that he had been there for some time. He told me that we might be able to restore some of the inmates to bodily health but that their minds would be distorted for years to come – perhaps for ever.

Gradually the medical teams assembled and it became possible to set up soup kitchens. The poor wretches could only take in a limited amount of liquid nourishment as solid food would have killed them. The more we witnessed the living proof of human beings' capacity for ill-treatment of their fellows, the more we found it difficult to keep control of ourselves. The effect on Reg Seekings was one of utter rage. I could see that he

was on the verge of pulling out his pistol and shooting the first German guard he came across. The Hungarian auxiliaries were just as bad. A woman prisoner thrust her hand under the wire to try to grab a rotten turnip and one of them shot her dead.

Our immediate task completed, and with the main Army in control of the situation in Belsen, we were ordered to move back to the front. Our SAS troops were the first to enter the city of Lüneburg, and there, my bitterness towards the Germans was further reinforced. Civilians we spoke to were of the firm opinion that concentration camps simply did not exist. When posters were put up showing the mass graves at Belsen, they were dismissed as British propaganda. As long as I live I will never forget the Germans who perpetrated such acts. Although I was only twenty-one at the time, I had been in action for three years and was no stranger to violent death. What I saw in that camp, however, defies adequate description and those scenes will stay with me for ever.

Before we reached Lüneburg, we had quite a fracas in some woods. We were advancing in front of a patrol from the Inns of Court and came up against a group of Germans who were determined to take us on. They were all well armed and we ran into quite an ambush. I was on the crown of the road in the leading jeep when they opened up with everything they had, including their anti-tank rockets known as *Panzerfausts*. I drove the jeep into the ditch and Reg opened up with the Vickers, followed by the rest of the troop. But as the Germans were all in thick cover and we were in the open, I decided that discretion was called for. I signalled to Reg that we should get out, and he agreed with a thumbs up sign. Creeping into the driving seat of the jeep, I started the engine lying on the floor, controlling the accelerator with my hand. I then sat behind the wheel, engaged four-wheel drive and managed to climb back onto the road. The rest of the boys needed no further encouragement and

I roared off back down the road with the troop behind in hot pursuit. Around a bend we came up with the Inns of Court armoured cars, accompanied by Harry Poat, our second-in-command. He gave orders for the armoured cars to open up with their six-pounders and heavy machine-guns to sort out the opposition. This was quickly accomplished and soon the enemy emerged with their hands up. This was to be the last time that we were fired at before the final surrender a few days afterwards.

Our next assignment was in Lüneburg where we were to assist the Intelligence Corps people in arresting Gestapo and SS officers who might try to change into civilian clothes and slip away. The operation was to take place at night and we were issued with detailed maps. The troop was to split up and go to different locations. H-Hour was 3 a.m. On our way towards the town we had our first view of the Hitler Youth boys. Some of the poor little blighters were only thirteen or fourteen years old and were being ousted from their trenches by our forward armour. Many of them were not even big enough to hold their *Panzerfausts*. They were crawling out of holes everywhere and surrendering, but not before several of them had been killed. It seemed a disgrace to us that the Germans put schoolboys into uniform and forced them to fight, when their chances of survival were minimal. It was to my mind inhumane, and many of us took sympathy on those young boys.

Pausing on the outskirts of the town, we once again went over the maps trying to memorize our respective routes for the early swoop. The actual operation was quite a success and we collected a motley crew of SS and Gestapo whom we handed over to the Intelligence people. We then spent a few days in Lüneburg, sorting ourselves out and having a look around. At this time we knew that there was an armistice in the offing which would lead to a complete German surrender. As we had received no definite orders about future intentions, Reg, Jack Terry and myself decided to drive on towards Kiel.

About ten kilometres down the road, our jeep was forced to a halt by two German generals standing in the middle of the road with their hands up. They indicated to us a field beside the road that was packed with officers and NCOs who also wanted to surrender. It was quite a laugh as we parked our jeep in the middle and started to accept the capitulation of about five hundred German officers. Each came forward in order of rank from general down to lieutenant to place their revolvers on the bonnet of the jeep, at the same time giving the traditional military salute. It was noticeable that not one of them attempted a 'Heil Hitler'. The whole episode developed into quite an embarrassing situation for us because it was quite obvious that we could neither guard them nor do anything about them. In the end we informed the senior general that he was to stay put and wait for the rest of our Army to catch up with them!

Leaving our 'prisoners' we then drove off in the direction of Kiel. Unbeknown to us, however, a radio message had been transmitted while we were on the move: an armistice line had been established to the south of Kiel and we were not to cross it. Thus we drove into Kiel in our three armoured jeeps and made our way to the Rathaus (town hall) where the deputy mayor surrendered to us. Reg, Jack and I were in the mayor's office having a rare old time tearing down the numerous pictures of Hitler when the following signal reached us: 'Cooper of 1 Troop, get out. Get back to your original positions. You are well over the armistice line and this might upset the armistice agreement.' I immediately acknowledged this message and we bundled back into the jeeps to retrace our steps. It was most embarrassing to roar back down the road past all the confused German officers still standing around in the field. We waved cheerily to them as we passed. Quite unintentionally we had misbehaved, but luckily Colonel Franks fully understood that it was not our fault that we had failed to receive the signal whilst moving forward.

The armistice was signed in due course and we were ordered back to Brussels to reorganize. We were told that we would be moving to Norway a few days after the final German surrender, to supervise the disarming of the occupying enemy forces. So it was back to England for a few days, and in mid-May the two British SAS Regiments were airlifted to Kristiansand in Norway. From there we moved to Bergen where both regiments had their headquarters alongside the Brigade HQ. Our immediate tasks were to supervise the collection of German troops along the coastline, disarm them and move them into prisoner of war camps. Half of A Squadron was to be sent north under the command of Alex Muirhead to the small village of Vadheim. This was situated on Sogne Fiord, the longest and perhaps the deepest of the fiords which stretch inland from the sea for more than a hundred kilometres. To get there we travelled in a German E boat manned by a German naval crew, plus two Norwegian fishing boats. Although the E boat was restricted to the use of only two of its engines, it could still cruise along at more than twenty-five knots. The German sailors were excellent seamen and a likeable lot. We were sorry to see them depart for prison camps when their vessel was withdrawn to Bergen.

Summer in Vadheim was delightful with no real night at all. We stayed in a requisitioned hotel, which was very comfortable, and the population was most welcoming: the boys spent a lot of their time looking at the lovely blonde girls. Paddy Mayne paid us a visit for a couple of days and joined us in water skiing and swimming. There was little work to do and the detachment's morale was very high indeed. The bad news was that we were told that the regiment was to be disbanded now that the European war was over. There had been all sorts of plans for us to move to the Pacific theatre; David Stirling, released from Colditz, had wanted us to go to China with our jeeps in support of American forces who were operating out of Burma at the time: but the

dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima put paid to that.

Paddy's visit concluded with a magnificent party in the hotel, for which he paid. Then, at about three o'clock in the morning, he said, 'Cooper, you're a navigator. You can take me back to Bergen.'

All our Norwegian fishing boats were out on duty but we still had a small landing craft with the last of the German Navy personnel, consisting of a coxswain and an engineer. I asked the cox if he knew his way to Bergen and he said that he did not have a clue. The previous commander, however, had left a set of charts which I perused intently. I worked out a route, and of course there was no need to venture into the open sea as we could travel inside the belt of islands along the coast. We set off with Paddy being towed along behind clinging onto a rope, but when we reached the main fiord he let go and climbed on board, threatening me that if we ran aground I would lose my commission. I had little to fear, though, as the water in the fiords was so deep that one could go right close into the shore without danger. The trip down the long Sogne Fiord was an easy navigational exercise and then we turned south between the beautiful small islands. All I had to do was to keep a check on progress by taking bearings on the many lighthouses all marked on the charts.

After two days we turned into Bergen Fiord and tied up alongside one of the many jetties. To my surprise I saw Brigadier Calvert standing there. He yelled down at us: 'Where's your CO?' In fact, Paddy was lying there on his back, sunbathing and fast asleep. For the previous two days we had had no radio communication, but Vadheim had informed Brigade HQ that Paddy was on his way. Apparently they got worried and thought that Cooper's navigation had ended us up in Narvik.

Our stay in Norway had certainly been a delightful holiday after the rigours of the war years, but we received news that we were to return to Hylands Park to enter into

what the Army termed 'suspended animation'. All that was left was a series of splendid parties and memorable fun and games. One unforgettable night, Paddy Mayne drove a jeep up the marble stairs of Hylands Park onto the landing and through the massive oak doors. It was left there with the firm intention of recovering it in the morning. Sobered up and in full daylight, it proved impossible to get the jeep back through the doors in spite of the expertise of our best drivers. In the end we had to take the doors off their hinges, and how Paddy got it up through two right-angled bends and through the double doors remains a mystery to this day.

Another high spirited occasion was when Paddy told the adjutant to ring up the Chelmsford Fire Brigade and tell them to send an engine to Hylands Park as we had a problem. The brigade's first reaction, quite naturally, was to assume that we had a fire, so they sent the fire chief and a full crew. When they arrived in front of the main steps, all the mess waiters were lined up with trays of drinks. One of the firemen must have cunningly called back to their base to say that the SAS were having a farewell party, because soon we had the entire Chelmsford force sitting on the steps supping their ale. Thank goodness there were no fires that evening!

By mid-September 1945 it was quite clear that the two British regiments of the SAS were to be disbanded. The French and the Belgians returned home to be reintegrated into their own armies. Lady Hanbury visited us to say how sorry she was to see us go and that our unit was to be folded up. There was, however, a final parade prior to our leaving to rejoin our original branches of the service. The whole Regiment was drawn up, squadron by squadron, in front of the main house, with Paddy Mayne out in front. He proudly wore his sand-coloured desert beret while the rest of us sported the dark red Airborne headgear. Montgomery came to

say farewell to us, and to many it might have seemed that the history of the SAS had been a brief but glorious one. I little thought at the time that I would become so deeply involved with the Regiment in the future.

8 Interlude and return

The end of the war was for me an anti-climax. Although still only twenty-one years of age, I had experienced many theatres of war and had enjoyed the solid comradeship with so many of my friends in the SAS, especially Reg Seekings. Once the Regiment went into suspended animation, I was posted back to 6 Battalion, Green Howards, who were at that time based close to the West Riding town of Pickering. We were preparing for an overseas posting, probably the Middle East, but the War Office had not divulged our destination. The reason for the posting was that when I was commissioned in December 1943 from the Middle East OCTU, I had to select a parent infantry unit, as at that time there were no commissions in the Army List to the SAS, and I had chosen the Green Howards because of my fondness for the county of Yorkshire, fostered during the time I worked at Bradford before the war.

I duly arrived in Pickering and, after settling into the Nissen-hutted camp, was summoned for an interview with my new commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel P.V.V. Guy. He had been taken prisoner during the retreat to Dunkirk and had spent the whole of the war in a prison camp. During our talk he expressed his regret at having missed the war, and said that he envied the experience that I, as a very young officer, had gained. I was then introduced to the four company commanders, three of whom had served in the Eighth Army, so I was among friends who spoke the same language. At this stage, Colonel Guy revealed our destination, which

Speakman's Hill

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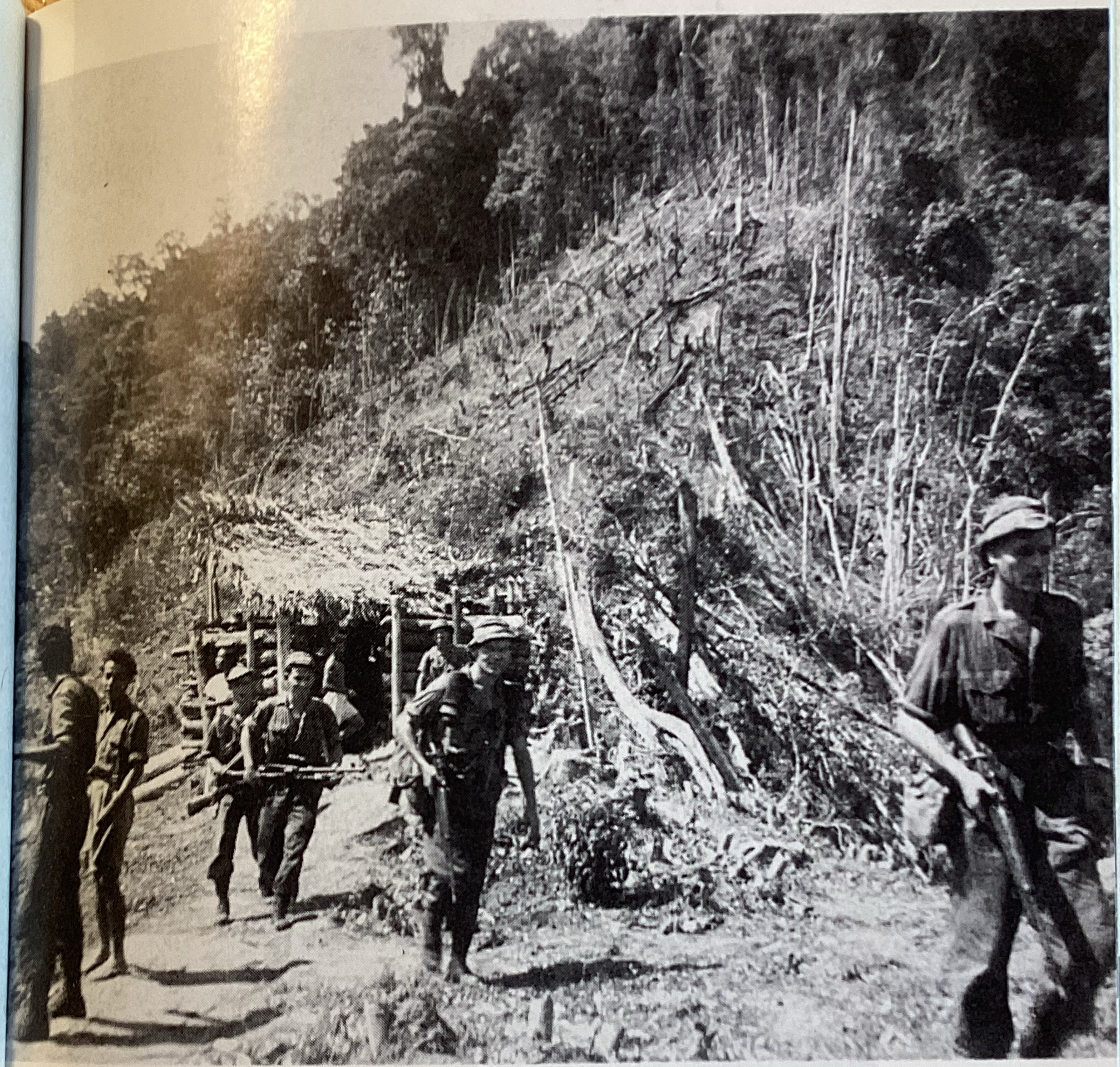


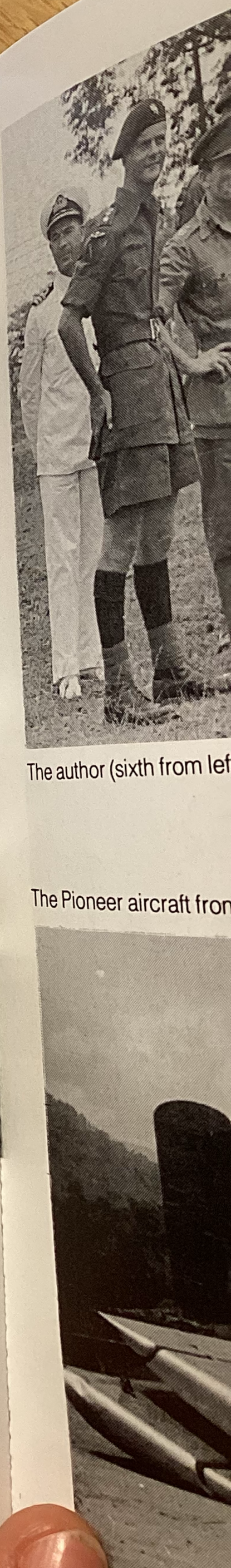
Speakman's Hill

Corporal Lyle, Lieutenant Murray and Trooper Downing on their return from the 122-day patrol

above left:
Crossing a river in Malaya

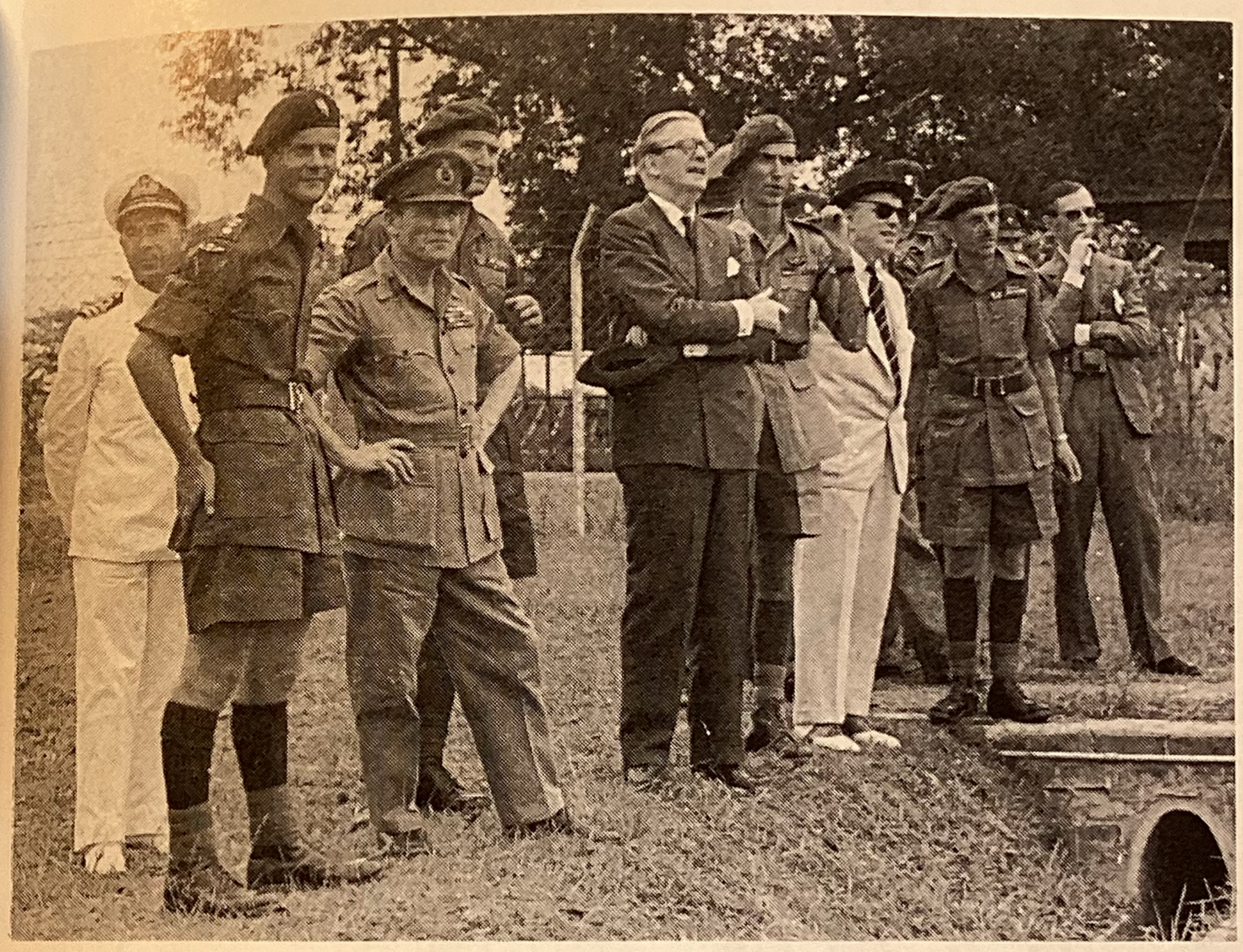
Peter Fich, BBC, interviewing the author *(right)* in Malaya

Fort Brooke



The author (sixth from lef

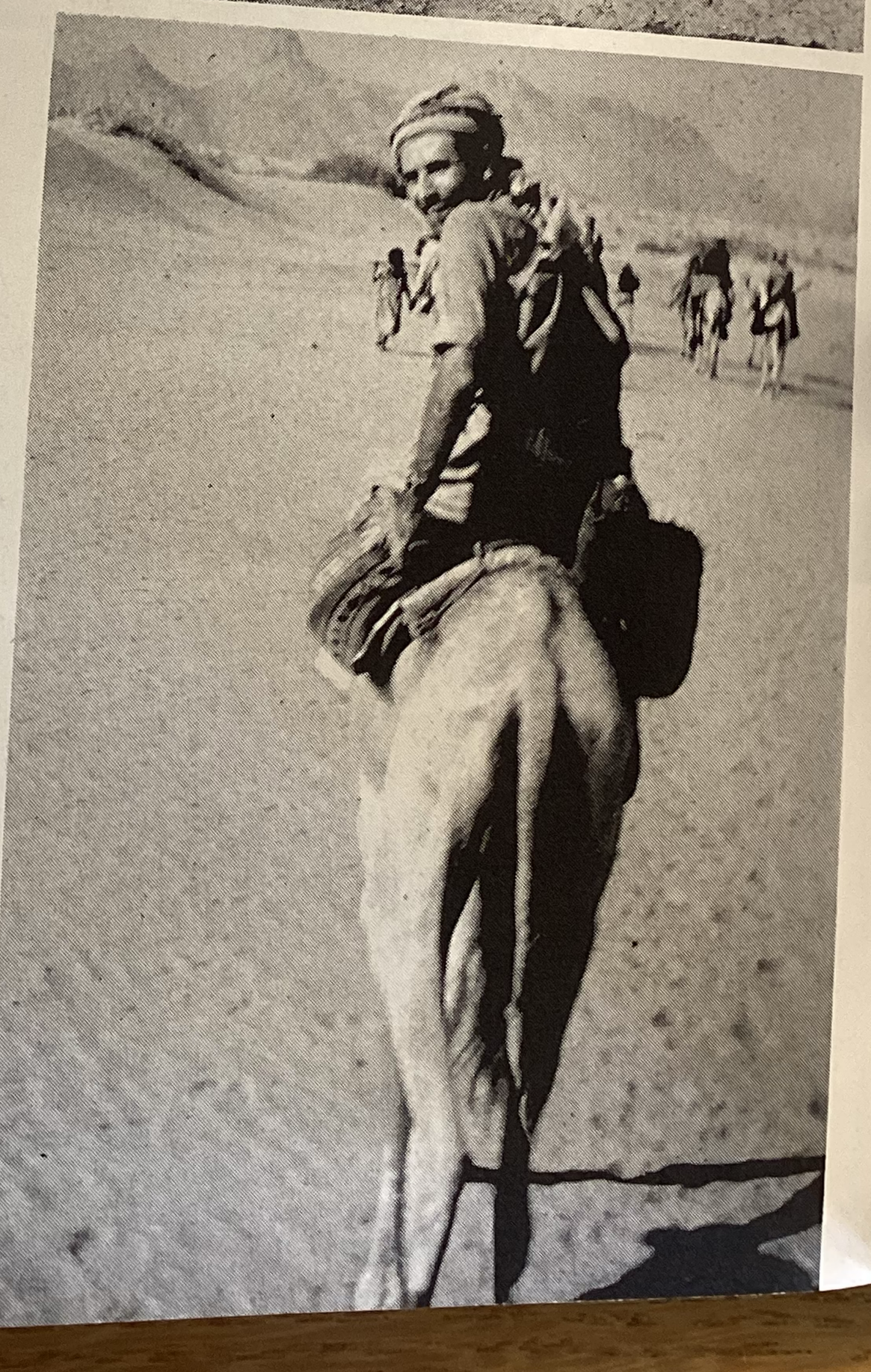
The Pioneer aircraft fron



The author (sixth from left) briefing Sir Anthony Eden in Kuala Lumpur, 1956

The Pioneer aircraft from which the author had a lucky escape

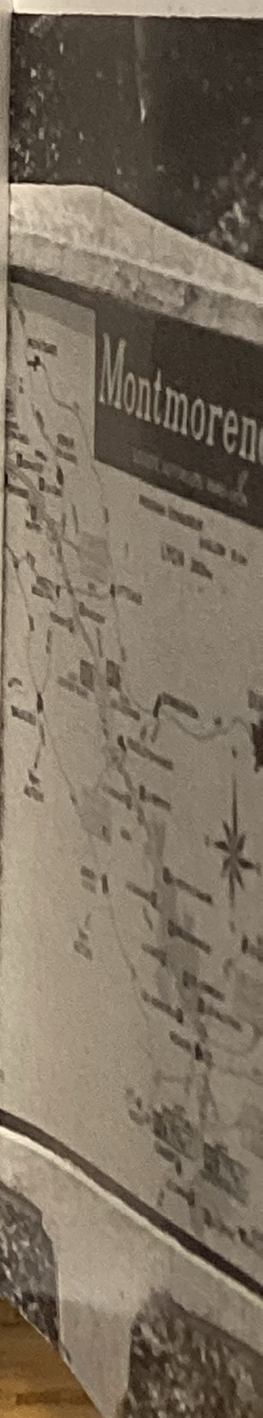
Author in Arab dress

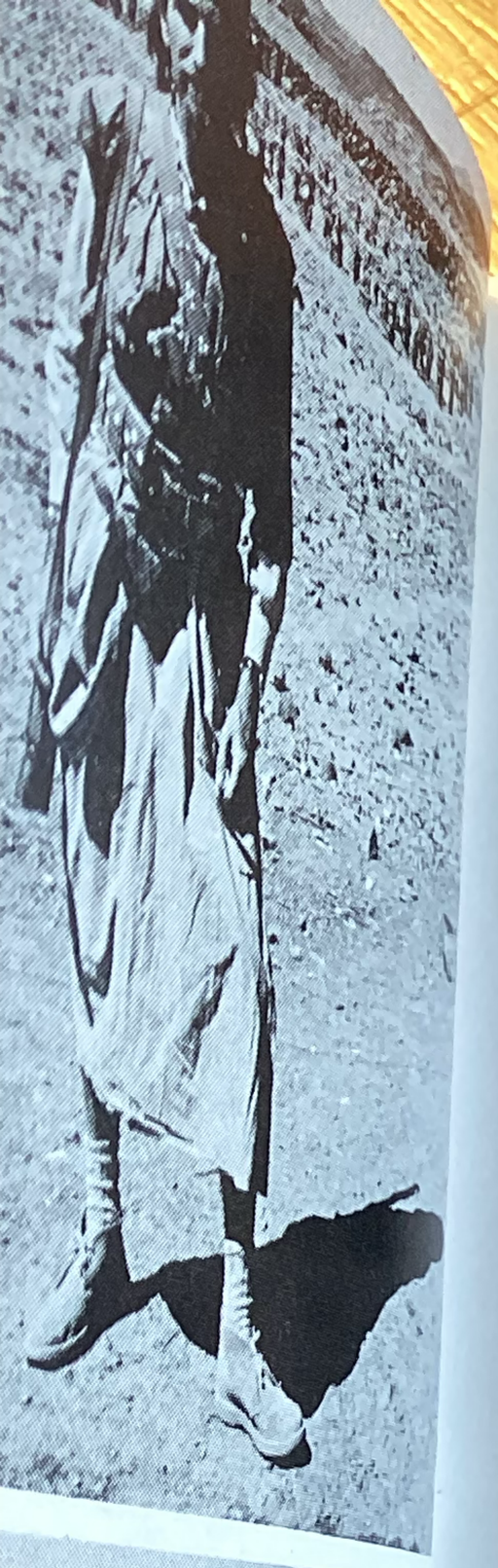


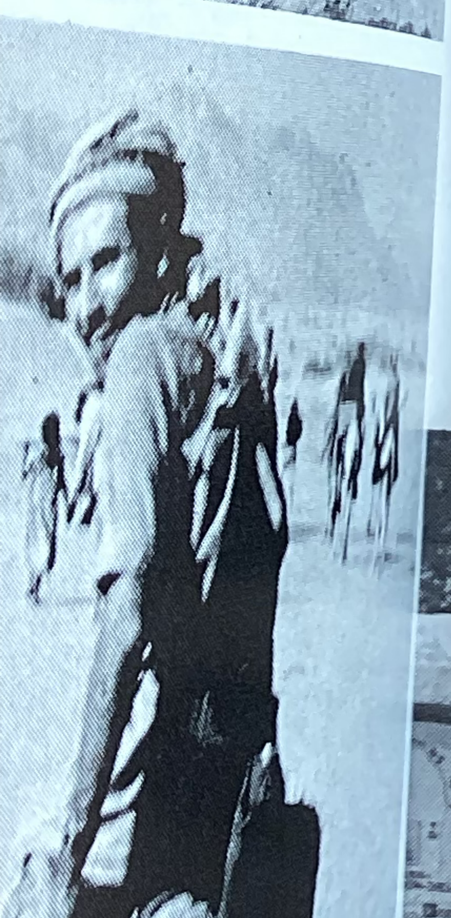
Author on a camel
in North Yemen

Author with Cyril Weavers (ce

Author recently in the Morva

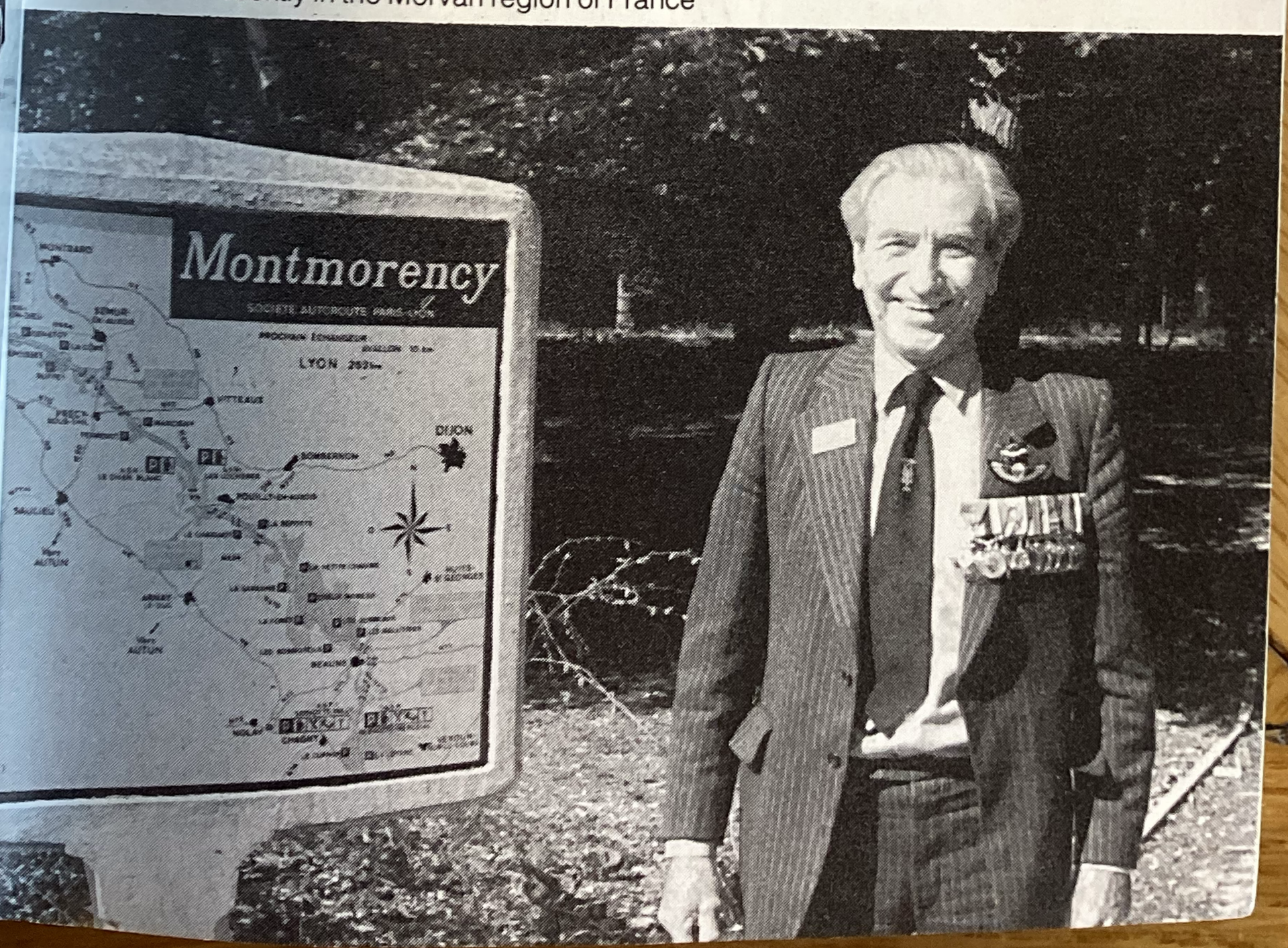




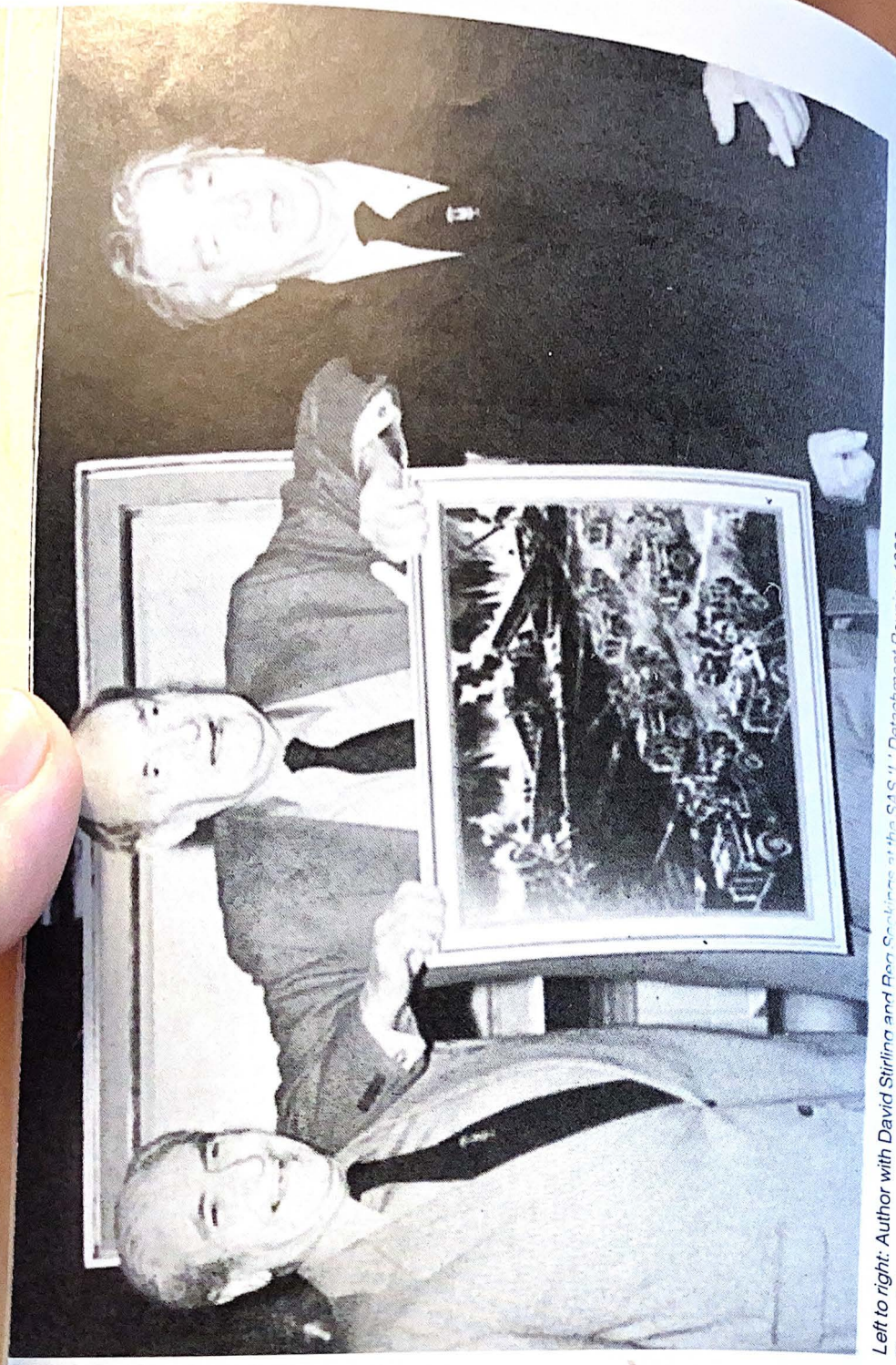


Author with Cyril Weavers *(centre)* and Ahmed, medical orderly

Author recently in the Morvan region of France



Left to right: Author with David Stirling and Reg Seekings at the SAS 'L' Detachment Reunion 1988.
The painting depicts aircraft being blown up by SAS jeep action



Left to right: Author with David Stirling and Bob Scribbins at the SAS 'L' Detachment Reunion 1988. The painting depicts aircraft being blown up by SAS jeep action

was to be Cyprus where we were to take over garrison duties. My particular job would be as adjutant, which set me back rather a bit. Throughout my service I had not had any administrative experience and hardly knew how to fill in a charge sheet, let alone run a battalion orderly room with a staff of fifteen. Luckily this was headed by a very knowledgeable warrant officer on whom I was able to rely for advice at all times.

While still in Britain awaiting the move to Cyprus, I received a call summoning me to meet David Stirling in London at White's Club. I duly arrived in my best service dress sporting my three pips as a captain and was carefully vetted by the head porter. After waiting a few minutes in the lounge, David came breezing in and said, 'Johnny, how nice to see you.' He looked none the worse for his time in Colditz and we had a fantastic reunion. We were joined for lunch by George Jellicoe, Fitzroy Maclean and, at the last moment, by Randolph Churchill.

The 6th Battalion was an old territorial unit which had seen a lot of service during the war, but was in the process of retraining in the newest infantry tactics, a change of emphasis resulting from the experiences gained after D-Day and in the Rhine campaign. When our training period was over, in early 1946, we boarded a troop ship for Cyprus. The only other forces on the island were the RAF detachment at Nicosia. We found ourselves based near the small town of Larnaca and one of the few remaining leper colonies in Europe. The battalion was spread all over the island, with one company in Nicosia, one in the port of Limassol and another up in the Trudos mountains. Thus my job as adjutant was quite a mobile one enabling me to travel from company to company; in the process I got to know the island quite well. The idyll, however, was not to last for long. During that summer we received instructions that the battalion was to be disbanded and, for that purpose, was to move to Almaza Camp near Cairo.

Colonel Guy handed over to Colonel Archie Parkinson, who had previously been the second-in-command, and once again I found myself in Egypt, never having expected to see the Suez Canal again. Gradually our battalion was broken up, most of the men being posted to Greece, where a British force was fighting communist guerrillas in the mountains. When the last men had left, orders were received that I would be demobilized from the Army in January 1947. I returned home and spent the remainder of my time attached to the depot of the Parachute Regiment at Aldershot. On 8 January I was officially demobbed, becoming once more a civilian and with little idea of what the future would hold.

On returning to Leicester, I discovered that in my absence my father had been in touch with my old employers, the Bradford firm of Vickers and Wheelers. They asked me to go back to them on a government assisted scheme to train as a wool buyer for the company in Australia. Thus I returned to Bradford and settled down to learn the intricacies of the wool trade. I did, however, hear that the SAS Regiment was to be revived as a territorial unit, based on the Artists' Rifles which during the war had been an officer-producing set-up. The new SAS would wear the Mars and Minerva cap badge of the Artists and SAS shoulder titles. The man behind the revival was Colonel Brian Franks who had been the last commanding officer of the 2nd SAS Regiment during the war.

I got in touch with Brian Franks and was offered a TA commission as a lieutenant on 6 January 1948. As I was working far away from the London headquarters, Franks asked me to take command of a phantom troop of SAS which was to be attached to the 10th Yorkshire Parachute Battalion stationed between Bradford and Leeds, with a company in Halifax. My troop was formed by ex-SAS regulars who, like me, had joined the TA, and we would train with the local battalion. We wore the Mars

and Minerva badge but also sported the Airborne Pegasus on our arms. The commanding officer was a regular soldier, Colonel George Lea, who later became a lieutenant-general, and he was followed by Colonel Oliver Brooks. Ironically, both those men were to command me, but in reverse order, when I later rejoined the regular Army with 22 SAS in Malaya. I attended the first camp of the SAS/Artists' Rifles at Okehampton in Devon, and had a fantastic two weeks. As so many of the old hands had rejoined, the camp turned into a splendid reunion and the atmosphere was wonderful. The problem was that this happy fortnight upset me for my future life as a civilian. I had great doubts about what I was doing and whether it was all worthwhile. Was I really happy?

In this frame of mind, however, I returned to my duties in Yorkshire and was then sent out to Australia for several months. On my return to Bradford I carried on with my TA activities. During further parachute training I met with my first serious accident. We had taken part in a display at the Butlin's holiday camp at Skegness and the following weekend we were to complete three jumps each at the RAF station at Sherburn-in-Elmet. On my second jump I was coming down against a very strong crosswind and, at the last minute, a vicious gust threw my parachute over at an acute angle. Instead of hitting the grass on the aerodrome, I came down flat on my back on the concrete runway, knocking myself out cold. I woke up in Leeds Infirmary in the spinal ward, strapped to a flat rubber bed and suffering the worst pain I ever wish to remember. After about three days I was told that there was a distinct possibility that I would never walk again as I had crush-fractured my fourth and fifth vertebrae. For someone like me who had always led a full and active life this was tantamount to a death sentence. I had survived the war and yet now I was faced with disablement as a result of a minor accident. I lay there, drugged with painkillers but still subject to fits of depression. As often happens with the medical profession, however, they got

it wrong. I gradually got better and after two weeks lying in great discomfort I was able to walk again. After much physiotherapy I was discharged as fit for further duty.

By the end of 1951 I decided that enough was enough for me. Although my period with the TA had been very happy, I was not cut out for civilian life. Through Brian Franks I was put in touch with Tony Greville-Bell with a view to rejoining the regular Army. This resulted in the offer of an extended short service commission which I accepted with alacrity on 17 December 1951. Once again I was in uniform, as a lieutenant with a posting to join 22 SAS Regiment in Malaya. This particular unit had originated as the Malayan Scouts which had been raised by Mike Calvert for service in Malaya, and had been filled out by volunteers from the territorial 21 SAS and a Rhodesian squadron. It was, and still is, the only regular SAS regiment in the British Army.

At the end of the war, when the area was liberated from the Japanese, Malaya reverted to colonial status. In a conflict which became known as the Malayan 'Emergency' and which started in 1948, British forces were pitted against communist guerrilla bands, largely Chinese in ethnic origin and based in the thick jungle. The conflict continued officially until 1960, and for much of the time the SAS, with its particular skills, made a powerful contribution to the final settlement.

I was re-kitted out and sent off to Singapore by troopship. From there I travelled by train up to Kuala Lumpur where I was met by Tony Greville-Bell and Bob Bennett, my old comrade of the days in the desert, who was our sergeant-major. At our camp at Sungei Besi, I found myself quartered in skid row along with the other lieutenants. Together with my close supporters, Peter Rich and Peter Raven, I reckoned that at twenty-nine I was probably one of the oldest lieutenants in the British Army. B Squadron was commanded by another old friend, Alastair McGregor, and I was put in charge of 8 Troop.

The camp was about eight miles from Kuala Lumpur and the barrack blocks were constructed from barusti (plaited palm leaves) with asbestos roofs. The barusti permitted excellent air circulation and the blocks were pleasantly cool, although the mosquitoes which infested the monsoon ditches were not deterred. When I arrived, the regiment was commanded by Colonel Sloane of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, and our mission was to seek out and destroy communist terrorists who were operating in the jungle. The greatest bugbear was the rainfall. If there was no great downpour after three or four days, it was reckoned to be a drought. The rain normally started in tropical style during the early afternoon, and if you were out driving you had to stop, as steam from the tarmac made visibility impossible. The deep monsoon ditches on either side of the road would fill up with several feet of water, but at about four o'clock the sun would reappear. Then everything returned to normal until the next downpour, probably during the night.

I was initiated into the jungle by Alastair McGregor and my men of 8 Troop. We would enter by way of one of the huge rubber plantations or, in the south, through a pineapple estate. This would bring us into the area of secondary jungle which had been intensively logged by Chinese contractors and was very difficult to penetrate. As the huge trees were cut down, the sun penetrated and almost overnight dense foliage sprang up, including massive bamboo thickets. The only way to move was to have a lead scout armed with a parang or machete. Once through the secondary jungle we would enter the primary jungle and immediately find ourselves in comparative darkness. The huge trees stretched anything up to two hundred and fifty feet high and had enormously thick bases. Movement was much faster and smoother, and the lead scout's role was changed to one of vigilance, for there we might meet communist terrorists (CTs). If possible we preferred to avoid existing tracks, even animal ones, because of the danger of ambush. Another

unpleasant device used by the CTs was a pit full of sharpened bamboo staves covered over with leaves. Spencer Chapman wrote a well-known book with the title, *The Jungle is Neutral*. The SAS had a saying that, yes, it may be neutral, but slightly anti-British!

Getting to know the jungle, the problems of survival and how to look after oneself was a complicated business. Apart from the enemy, leeches were our main adversary. They would fall off the leaves and latch onto one's softest areas, around the neck, behind the ears, under the armpits, and on a long patrol they would even find their way to one's private parts. You couldn't feel them, but as they slowly sucked blood they enlarged into horrible black swollen lumps. If you were a smoker, it was easy to get rid of them – just a touch with a burning cigarette and they would fall off. I did not smoke and had to resort to flicking them off which required quite a degree of skill: it you flicked too quickly the head of the leech would remain embedded in the skin, which would turn septic and result in a bad jungle sore. These were not unlike desert sores, but as our diet in Malaya was much better than the bully beef and hard tack we had survived on in North Africa, they healed more quickly.

I never had a feeling of claustrophobia in the jungle. It was intensely quiet and very cool, and in the more mountainous states in Malaya we would come across many rivers and fast-flowing streams. Carrying up to 60lbs in a Bergen plus personal weapons limited the length of time between halts on a patrol. The only Malayan landscape which was a real nightmare were the swampy areas, notably in Selangor. Before my initiation there, I found it hard to believe that it could take up to one hour to cover five hundred yards. The mangrove trees were not particularly tall, so the sun did penetrate, and the water level could be anything up to three feet in depth. The idea was to go from tree to tree stepping on the roots, but every so often you would find yourself up to the waist in gooey black mud. Pulling oneself out with a

heavy-rucksack on the back was no easy task. In the swamps we also made the acquaintance of the tiger leech which not only sucked blood but hurt as well. At nightfall, the only way to sleep was to sling a nylon hammock between two mangrove trees, hoping that the roots would be strong enough to bear the weight of your body. If they weren't, you would wake up with a bump, floating in the swamp.

The regiment operated throughout Malaya in all the various individual states of the Federation. SAS squadrons were in great demand by the commanders of the various brigades dotted all over the country. Headquarters sifted the requests for our help and allotted us according to priority, as we only had three operational squadrons, A, B and the Rhodesians of C Squadron. At the time, Police and Army chiefs were considering a policy of resettlement, both of the Chinese and Malay villages, and of the aboriginal tribes in the interior. Air reconnaissance had found that there were many aborigines in the mountains cultivating root crops such as the sweet potato – a fast-growing vegetable with a high nutritional content. Right from the beginning of the so-called Emergency, the CTs had dominated these tribespeople and their crops. Army headquarters and the police decided that troops would be used to clear patches of jungle close to aborigine settlements and erect forts to control an area of some five square miles.

At the same time, the SAS were grappling with the problem of parachuting into the jungle to try to cut off the escape routes of CTs operating near the estates and even to jump onto their camps. Many of these had been located by the pilots of our Army Air Corps squadron who flew patrols in their small Auster aircraft. The first jump was in early 1952 into the Belum Valley and resulted in several men becoming hung up in jungle trees by their parachute harnesses. As a result it was decided to carry out experimental jumps to perfect a method of getting down from trees once ensnared.

Alastair McGregor was in charge of this programme. He selected Major Freddie Templer, our second-in-command and nephew of Sir Gerald Templer, and Major Peter Wallis, who later became the commander of the Rhodesian Army during the Ian Smith regime. I was invited to be the third member of the team.

The problem was that high winds made jumping into the clearings around aborigine settlements extremely hazardous. If you found yourself deposited on top of a two hundred foot high tree, how the hell could you get down? We decided that the answer was to drop our Bergens and then attach a hundred and fifty foot coil of rope, knotted at eighteen inch intervals, to a strong branch. The idea was then to simply climb down to the ground.

The time came for these ideas to be put into practice. At the briefing we were told that the area for the trials would be in the Bentong Gap in Selangor, along the road to Benta, and that we would each make at least two jumps, weather permitting. On the ground, 8 Troop would spread out to locate the jumpers and to help in their descent if necessary. The area selected had a really heavy and dense canopy of giant jungle trees. Before departure I was given an envelope containing nine benzedrine tablets by our MO, Freddie Brunton, as he considered that we should each take three between jumps. We were to jump without heavy equipment from a RAF Dakota in the order of Freddie Templer, Peter and then me. The only change in method was that the strong-points for attaching the static lines were situated on the starboard side of the aircraft at floor level. We, however, were accustomed to strong-points on the port side above the jumping door.

We took off and after about ten minutes we were ordered to hook up as we were approaching the DZ. On went the red light and we took up our positions, waiting for the green to come on. When it did so, the dispatcher yelled 'go' and Freddie disappeared out of

the door. But as Peter made his attempt, his helmet struck the top of the door frame and he fell back onto me. Using the old technique, I pushed my left hand into the middle of his parachute pack and heaved. Peter disappeared and I followed a split second behind him. As I tumbled through the slip stream I felt a dragging sensation in my left arm and then a terrible jarring pain as my helmet was wrenched off my head. With a crack my parachute opened and I found myself drifting in the still air, but with a horrible sensation that something was drastically wrong. What had happened was that in pushing Peter with my left hand, I had crossed his static line. As he went out of the door his line had wrapped itself around the upper part of my left arm, and when his chute opened, it broke the limb in several places, wrenching off my helmet and burning my neck in the process.

Coming to my senses in spite of the excruciating pain, I could see no sign of the other parachutes and only the green canopy of the jungle coming up to meet me at a frightening speed. Thankfully my arm went numb, and with my right hand I attempted to guide myself to enter the trees in a forward direction. I crashed into the top of the foliage, slithered through many branches and finally came to rest with my canopy well and truly hooked up. There I was, dangling between two huge jungle trees about thirty feet apart. Looking down I could see a massive bamboo thicket which was hardly a soft bed to fall onto! Momentarily I passed out as the pain from my injured arm swept over me again. I waited and waited, passed out again and then came to when I heard shouts from below. It was Sergeant Levett of 8 Troop who was shouting, 'I've got Cooper. He's up here.' Gradually the whole troop ended up underneath my position, but obscured by bamboo and undergrowth. If I had simply cut myself loose I would have had to drop some two hundred feet and risk being impaled on the bamboo.

Eventually, however, the doctor arrived and shouted up to me that he was going to try to scale the tree on my left using climbing irons, and could I drop my rope if I could ease it out from my harness. After about fifteen minutes I observed Freddie Brunton about seventy feet up on the trees to my left. I had managed to free the rope, and dropping it below with my right hand I made it swing backwards and forwards until Freddie managed to grab it. He then climbed back down out of sight.

The voices from below said that they had attached another rope to mine with a water bottle tied to the end. I was to pull it up if I could and drink some of the contents with a benzedrine tablet to stop myself from passing out again. By opening and closing my knees I managed to drag up the rope until I felt the water bottle below my legs. Unfortunately I found it impossible with only one hand to unscrew the metal cap and had to let it fall back down again. The doctor then shouted up that he would leave the top open and also put in a syrette of morphine. My job was to pull it back up again, drink what water remained and to try to inject the morphine through my uniform into my leg. After a further mighty effort I managed to pull up the bottle which was still about a third full. I took a long swig, got the envelope of benzedrine out of my smock and downed four tablets. As far as the morphia was concerned, however, I couldn't push the needle plunger into the ampoule. This may well have saved my life; the next part of my descent required my full attention, and the morphine would have put me to sleep.

Freddie Brunton once more climbed up to about eighty feet on the tree to my left and tightened my rope, attaching it to a piton which he had driven into the trunk. By that stage he had a bad attack of cramp, but said to me, 'Johnny, cut your right-hand lift webs. That will allow you to swing nearer to me.' Pulling out my knife with my right hand, I severed the webs, and then swung some ten feet nearer to Freddie's tree. He

then said that my only hope was to cut myself completely free. 'You'll then drop until the rope attached to the tree takes you up. You'll swing like a pendulum and hopefully you'll miss the tree during your initial fall.'

Obeying the doctor's instructions, I cut the final web and started to drop. I must have fallen about fifty or sixty feet before the rope brought me up and I began to swing. I went past the doctor, and on the return I also missed the tree. On the third swing, which by then was considerably slower, my back brushed against the trunk and almost brought me to a halt. By then Freddie had climbed back down to the ground and they started to lower me. At about fifteen feet above the floor of the jungle I passed out, as the harness was strangling me through the weight of the rope. Realizing this, Freddie shouted out, 'Let him drop!' I tumbled down in a heap, but luckily my fall was broken by the huge bulk of Roger Levett as he tried to catch me. As I came to, Freddie cut away my smock and administered a shot of morphine into my good arm. I must have passed out again and can remember little until I was lifted into the ambulance on the road. In spite of this, Levett told me later when he visited me in hospital that I had taken command of the troop. I had given orders to the lead scout and, when we had to cross a fast flowing stream near the road, gave instructions for covering fire. The standard jungle drills must have come out in spite of the effect of benzedrine and morphine.

In the ambulance I found Freddie Templer and Peter Walls taking great gulps from the pint bottles of Tiger beer which had been generously provided. I joined them in drinking the beer and they told me that they too had had bad experiences. Both were far too exhausted to try any further jumps that day. About an hour and a half later I walked into the surgical ward at Kinrara Hospital, swinging my broken arm and as happy as a sandboy, feeling no pain whatsoever. I was whipped straight into the operating theatre where Major Steele, the head surgeon,

examined my arm. He pronounced that it was broken in three places and had been badly stretched, and said that they would set the breaks right away and would deal with the torn nerves later. The anaesthetist attempted to put me out, but to no avail: I told the theatre staff that I had had benzedrine tablets as well as the morphine dose which was marked on my forehead, plus the two pints of beer that I had consumed in the ambulance. Throughout the operation I kept coming to and in the end was left to watch the proceedings.

Afterwards I was put in the officers' ward where Freddie Brunton and the CO came in to see me. Without Freddie there is no doubt that I would not have survived, and later I was overjoyed that he had been awarded the MBE for saving my life. After many weeks in Kinrara I was flown down to the 15th Scottish Hospital in Singapore, as all the doctors thought that I had delayed shock caused by all the dope I had taken before the operation. They were right. A few days after arriving in Singapore, I completely broke down. It lasted only about two or three hours and luckily there was a staff nurse present at the time who sorted out the problem for me. I had lost my memory and just sat there crying for no apparent reason. They sedated me and put me on a drug called Pehaldrehide. It smelt like petrol, tasted like petrol and I became so immune to it that I could drink it like lemonade. This particular drug only put me out for about one hour in twenty-four, and the nurses had a good laugh when I attached a piece of string to a cardboard label on which the initials ST were written in bright red letters. This meant 'suicidal tendency' – a real laugh after I had been interrogated for two hours by an Army psychiatrist who kept asking me whether I wanted to commit suicide or not. Luckily the doctor in charge of my case said, 'He's not gone mad. He's just in delayed shock owing to the amount of medication he took during his trials and tribulations.'

After weeks in Singapore I was transferred to the

Cameron Highlands Hospital in Pahang, situated at about six and a half thousand feet above sea level and surrounded by numerous tea estates. I was there to recuperate and I was told that if I entertained any thoughts of the Army keeping me on, I was to dismiss them as pipe dreams. It was just a case of getting me fit for medical discharge.

At the hospital there was a captain who acted as matron and who had been through the war. She had a long talk with me and took a personal interest in my rehabilitation.

'Now, young man, the first thing you must do is to stop taking the Pehaldrehide – it's no good for you and you are getting hooked on it. It's a real dope.' That night she put the evil smelling glass of liquid on my bedside table outside the mosquito net and said, 'Whatever happens, don't take it tonight.' I remember waking up and instinctively reaching for the glass. Fortunately I knocked it over and the nurse was beside me in a matter of seconds. She must have been waiting for it to happen. All she said was, 'No more of this at all.'

I had considerable withdrawal symptoms but slowly made a remarkable recovery. I began taking walks down to a local pub called The Smoke House which was on the golf course. There I met up with a lot of civilians who were connected with the various tea estates, and their hospitality was heart-warming.

After five weeks the doctors considered that I had recovered well enough to be sent back to the Regiment. On arrival I met Major Pat Hart who was commanding HQ Squadron and who, like me, was on an extended short service commission. He said to me, 'Johnny, you're going to have a medical board and, if you are fit enough, I would like you to take over the unenviable job of MTO.' It transpired that he had thirty-five assorted vehicles which were all in a deplorable state with only five actually on the road. The books were in an absolute

shambles and we only had a handful of Ordnance Corps fitters. Pat promised that he would buy a crate of beer for the MT staff for every single vehicle that we could get back on the road.

I thus settled back in as the boss of skid row and was then promoted to captain. On getting stuck into the reorganization, I found that nearly all the M.T. staff were keen to please, and with the added inducement of the beer, we struggled to get the vehicles back in running order again. We did an awful lot of cheating to obtain the necessary parts, helped most kindly by the M.T.O. of the 1st/7th Gurkha Rifles who were stationed nearby, with the deadline of a general inspection by headquarters staff in Kuala Lumpur looming. On the big day, believe it or not, we actually got every vehicle turning over. A huge party was held that night to consume the promised beer that Pat Hart duly delivered, keeping the tired but happy staff in a great party mood.

Then came the dreaded summons. I had to report to Kinrara Military Hospital for a board which would decide whether I was to be downgraded and returned to the UK, or whether I would be given an absolute medical discharge. Those sitting in judgement were the commanding officer of the hospital, Major Steele, who had operated on my arm, and three senior medical officers from other hospitals in Malaya. In his evidence, Major Steele stressed that there was a possibility that with physiotherapy and personal determination my arm could return to a semblance of normality. He emphasized that it was up to me to exercise at all times and informed the board that I had already started using a solid rubber ball in my left hand to strengthen the fingers. He stated that the arm had suffered multiple breaks, but that these had all knitted together perfectly. The problem was that the nerves had been stretched by the whip force of the static line returning to the aircraft when Peter Walls' parachute opened.

The board then duly retired to consider their findings,

and in due course I was summoned back in for the verdict. The senior officer in the chair informed me that if I returned to service with the SAS I would not at a later date be able to claim for compensation. The alternative was that I would be discharged immediately and would receive a small pension for my injuries. If the arm eventually recovered, that pension would be very small indeed. I replied straight away that I would prefer to stay with the Regiment and carry on with my work, and that I felt sure that, given time, I would be able to operate in the jungle once again. The board agreed to this and the chairman stated that he would take my word as an officer and a gentleman that I would not make any claims later on. Back I went to camp feeling extremely happy that I was not to be discharged from the Army and that also I was not to be downgraded medically at that stage.

By the time I returned to full duty, Oliver Brooke had taken over command of the Regiment. The Rhodesians were leaving for home and this would create a large hole in our available manpower until later the New Zealand Squadron and other reinforcements arrived. Brooke summoned me to his office and asked me if I felt fit enough to take command of a squadron. I had until the following morning to make up my mind. The next day I went in and gave the colonel my answer, in the affirmative. He explained to me then how this new unit, to be called C Squadron, would be recruited. Its operational task would be to penetrate from the Cameron Highlands into the mountains of Pahang, to establish a military fort in the region of the Sungei Brok. By resettling the aborigines in the area, they would be removed from the influence of the many CTs and their food crops would be denied to the enemy. The colonel stressed that he could only let me have a few experienced operators and that the majority of the squadron of eighty men would be made up from new recruits, clerks, signallers, drivers and any others who could be spared from base duties. I had one officer, Lieutenant Bruce Murray, and, most

fortunately, the very experienced Sergeant-Major 'Black Jake' Matthews who had been in the Malayan Police field force. I took with me my signaller, Corporal Jock Adams, who was among the best signallers in the regiment and always keen to go out on patrol. Thus equipped with my orders, I got down to getting the squadron into some sort of shape and with some fifteen experienced men we gave the newcomers as much training as possible.

In October 1953 I took my motley crew up to the Cameron Highlands, passing the hospital where I had recuperated, and on to the Bow Valley tea estate. From there we set off to penetrate into the virgin jungle. Our destination was a site chosen from the air for what was to become Fort Brooke. After two days we hit the fast flowing Sungei Brok and followed its course upstream until we reached the approximate position of the fort. The first job was to clear a small area and then we radioed for confirmation that we were on the correct site. An Auster aircraft came over and we were informed that we were at least in the right place. To secure the place from the attentions of CTs, I placed three screens out on the most dangerous approaches to our clearing. Then the heavy work began, blowing down the huge jungle trees, clearing the area of bamboo and building a wooden bridge over the river which was at that point about thirty feet wide. In the latter job, our local Iban trackers were of great help with their skill in splicing creepers to tie the bridge together. The structure lasted for many months although only two men could cross at any one time, and one had to get used to the swaying motion in midstream over the raging torrent.

By the middle of November we had cleared the site for the building of the fort and also constructed a helicopter landing ground as there was not enough room for a proper airstrip. This gave us the opportunity for more active patrolling into the aboriginal areas. Bruce Murray had a great success when he sorted out a complete CT gang, killing some and dispersing the

others from our immediate area. To the west, however, we suffered a tragedy when another patrol under the command of Corporal Digger Bancroft ran into an ambush. Digger, who was in the lead, was killed and Trooper Willis behind him was also shot. Fortunately the rest of the patrol reacted promptly, engaged the enemy and drove them off. I received the news by runner, immediately informed our headquarters of the casualties and requested a helicopter to bring out the bodies. Volunteers stepped forward to carry out the dead men; one of them was Bill Speakman, the Korean War VC who was doing his jungle training with C Squadron. This party disappeared off to Bancroft's old base and I ordered others to search for further traces of the enemy.

Recovery of our dead was for all of us a priority. We felt that we owed it to them to ensure that they got a decent burial, although luckily fatal casualties were relatively few. Bodies were always removed from the jungle by air and returned to base for certification and burial.

The next morning, Lieutenant-Commander Suthers of 848 Squadron, Royal Navy, flew in and said that he would wait for the arrival of the bodies. Just before noon our scouts observed Bill Speakman emerging from the edge of the jungle with a bamboo pole across his shoulders to which Bancroft's body was strapped. The other three troopers were supporting the back end of the pole. They slowly made their way to the helicopter and gently placed the corpse beside it. I congratulated the recovery party on completing their painful and delicate task, and said that further volunteers were needed to go back for Willis. Speakman promptly approached me and said that as he was stronger than the other boys, he would go back for the body. This was a courageous act as his feet were cut to shreds. Size fourteen jungle boots were unobtainable and we had had to cut out the toes of the size twelves he was wearing. By mid-afternoon the second recovery party arrived back with Willis's body, once again with

Speakman in the lead, and the helicopter took off for Kuala Lumpur.

Those two were to be the only fatal casualties during the whole hundred and twenty-two days we spent in the area. As the weeks passed, however, half my force was helicoptered out either with fever, Weil's Disease (Leptospyrosis) or jungle fatigue. On 7 February 1954, our task completed, we were relieved by a field force from the police who took over the manning of Fort Brooke. On our arrival back at the Cameron Highlands we were driven down to the railway station at Tappah, where we were met by a horde of journalists. An extremely exaggerated article subsequently appeared in the *Sunday Pictorial* under the headline: 'Forty British lads to be proud of', excerpts from which I offer the reader as an example of how news can become distorted.

The *Pictorial* salutes them. Let Britain honour them.

Tonight they are recuperating in a rest camp here after 122 incredible days in the dark green jungle. Forty ordinary British soldiers with names like Bill Smith and Tommy Jones.

They have just performed a feat that ranks with the conquest of Everest for skill, cunning, courage and sheer dogged perseverance. They wouldn't have thanked you to call them heroes, those 40 bedraggled, pale faced men who emerged silently from the jungle darkness into the glare of daylight the other day, their mission completed.

If you had called them explorers, ambassadors, diplomats, mountain climbers and Tarzans, they would have laughed in your face, but that is what they were for, this is what they did. THEY completed a task which the experts said no white man could accomplish. They carried out a successful diplomatic mission by making contact with a little-known nation of people in Malaya who few white men had ever seen, a tribe who were under the complete domination of communist rebels. THEY penetrated farther and deeper into the jungle than any previous expedition. THEY lived off the land, aided by some supplies parachuted to them. THEY even slept in trees and trekked the days through rebel-infested forest. THEY may have paved the way for the most successful operation against the Communists yet conceived. It was on October the 3rd last year that 80 men, all crack bush-men, left the railhead in the lower jungle of Pahang. They knew the roots and berries and even which caterpillars to eat. All belong to the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment led by Capt. J.M.Cooper of Leicester. . . .

It had been a long hard slog, but with their usual hyperbole the tabloid newspapers only served to embarrass a regiment that prefers to keep out of the limelight. For my own satisfaction I received a signal from Oliver Brooke, as follows: 'Personal for Captain Cooper from Commanding Officer. Please convey to all ranks of your squadron, my very hearty congratulations and thanks on a really splendid effort. C Squadron has acquitted itself extremely well over this long period from October to February, and you should all be very proud. Much regret I cannot see you now personally owing to my departure to Hong Kong. A very good and well earned leave to you all.'

That was the end of the hundred and twenty-two day patrol, about which there has been quite a lot written since – including some criticism, especially from those who had been with the Chindits in Burma. It has to be said that their suffering was far greater, but theirs was a different sort of operation. Ours was a very small force indeed, but we did prove that relatively untrained soldiers can quickly adapt themselves to and overcome the many problems of living in the jungle. Our thanks must go to the RAF Valetta Squadron who resupplied us by parachute during those hazardous days, and the members of 55 Company, Air Dispatch, who toiled to keep us equipped with all our needs.

On my return to the unit after leave, I was informed that I was to take over the duties of operations officer and was promoted to major. Initially I was to serve under Oliver Brooke, but this was of short duration as he broke an ankle while parachuting. He was replaced for a short

while by Colonel Mike Osborne from the West Yorks until George Lea arrived to take command of 22 SAS. During my time as operations officer, in addition to the three existing squadrons we received reinforcements in the shape of the New Zealand Squadron and a squadron from the Parachute Regiment. On my staff I had Sergeant Harding, who really broke me into the job which was one of being on duty for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I had to conduct 'morning prayers' in the ops room every morning at eight o'clock, reading out the situation reports from the units in the jungle detailing their successes and failures. In addition, I had to conduct the commanding officer on numerous visits into the jungle, by helicopter or fixed wing aircraft, to discuss tactics with commanders on the spot.

On one of these occasions I had a lucky escape. I was flying into Fort Shean in a single-engined Pioneer aircraft piloted by Flight Lieutenant Shaw. In the front two seats were Colonel Osborne and an official from the aborigine department, with myself, a Gurkha liaison officer and Willy Wilcox in the rear. The fort was sited in a deep valley with a landing strip of about one hundred and eighty yards, at the end of which was a pile of rocks which had been pushed there by the torrential rains of the previous year. We came in low for our landing but overshot the initial touch-down area and Shaw put on the boost to go round for a second attempt. Colonel Osborne turned around to us and indicated that we should pull up our safety straps as tightly as possible. As we floated in for our second attempt, the undercarriage hit the piled rocks and we turned completely over, ending up on our back about fifty yards from the beginning of the runway. There was a grinding crash and the engine revved as the propeller disintegrated. One of the wings was torn off and disappeared from sight, and we found ourselves hanging upside down in our harnesses which were secured to D rings in the floor of the aircraft. Deciding that fire was imminent, I slapped the release

knob and fell out through the broken perspex canopy onto the ground, landing on all fours, hotly pursued by the colonel, Wilcox and the others. Then miraculously the engine died, which at least diminished the risk of conflagration. As we picked ourselves up, we saw a police officer trotting down the runway from the fort, followed by a mess waiter with a bottle of brandy and glasses on a tray. The fort commandant told us later that he had witnessed the whole event as if in slow motion and only when he saw us crawl out alive did he realize that we had got away with it.

During my time as operations officer, we had great rivalry with the Gurkha Rifles over the 'kill to contact ratio', and both us and the wiry little men from Nepal were way ahead of other units in this respect. The expression can best be defined as the number of contacts with enemy guerillas expressed as a ratio against numbers killed. We found that our three-man patrol unit was highly successful on account of the way it could move quietly through the jungle: larger units were normally betrayed by the amount of noise they made.

An example that comes to mind is when Sergeant Turnbull's patrol tracked a gang of terrorists through the jungle for three days until they located their camp. After watching a sentry for some hours, they saw him withdraw when it started to rain. Moving forward, the patrol took up a position from where they could observe the camp in detail. They shot all four terrorists without fire being returned, and after searching the bodies of the enemy, buried them in the jungle.

A further example was when Sergeant Levett, of the Household Cavalry, was strolling with his signaller near the troop base. They heard movement in the thick bamboo further up the mountain and quickly moved into an ambush position. Levett ordered the signaller, who was only armed with an M1 carbine, to shoot the first CT who appeared, while he would use his pump-action

shotgun loaded with 12-bore SG shot to spray the ground behind. Slowly the noise of movement increased and the first enemy scout appeared. The signaller opened fire, but his high velocity .30 calibre bullet failed to hit a vital part. Levett finished him off with his first shot and then pumped the remaining eight rounds into the jungle beyond. There they found three bodies, torn to pieces by the SG shot, which were retrieved together with their weapons and airlifted out for identification by HQ.

During my stint as operations officer, I was lucky to have been present when the Regiment received a visit from the Prime Minister, Anthony Eden. I was delegated as conducting officer for the entire programme and had the honour both of briefing him in the ops. room and conducting a parachute demonstration for him at Coronation Park. He asked a lot of questions both about the Regiment and my own personal experiences, and as an ex-soldier himself delved into many of our problems concerning weapons, supplies and equipment. We also took him on a helicopter visit to our training squadron.

After Colonel George Lea had taken over the Regiment, I continued as operations officer for a further three months, and was then summoned one morning to the CO's office to be told that I would be taking over B Squadron from the Hon. John de Grey. B Squadron, usually known as Big Time Bravo, had initially been formed from the original band of SAS volunteers under Tony Greville-Bell and Bob Bennett who had come out to stiffen the Malayan Scouts. Since then, 22 SAS Regiment had been transformed into a thoroughly professional unit. Squadron duty normally added up to two months in the jungle, two weeks on leave, two weeks retraining and then back again on patrol, in any one of the Malay states.

Under the auspices of Major John Salmon, our second-in-command, we were carrying out trials to develop a two-week ration that was possible for a man to carry. The object was to avoid the weekly air drops which were

a complete give-away and lost us the vital element of surprise. In the end we came up with what we called the 'starvation ration'. It was carried in a four-gallon petrol tin and contained no metal except for the aluminium top of the tube holding our condensed milk. Everything was dehydrated, meals were rice-based, and it seemed that a man could exist for a fortnight on the pack while at the same time being able to carry the normal complement of weapons, ammunition, radio batteries and personal kit.

For quite some time, the Intelligence people had suspected that there was an enemy radio station operating close to the Thai border somewhere between Garik and Kota Bahru. The border area was extremely mountainous and the main range, Anik Ring, rose to over six thousand feet. The plan was for the squadron to enter the area by travelling upriver from Kota Bahru, cross the Anik Ring range and enter what was known as The Valley Of No Return to try to locate the CT transmitter. We were flown up by the RAF and proceeded up the river in native craft driven by outboard motors. We had fourteen days to get in before receiving our first air drop which would give the game away. The B Squadron officers at the time were all old hands – Punchy McNeil, Bernard Mills, Frank Scott, Peter Bennett and Derek Lester, supported by Sergeant-Major McAndrews, a little Scot with great drive. All the troop sergeants were experienced men who had great confidence in the unit's ability to carry out the task required. I split the squadron into two lines of approach until we had crossed the summit of the mountains and then planned to divide up into four sweeps down into the valley.

Intelligence direction finders had narrowed down the site of the transmitter to an area of a few square miles, but pinpoint accuracy was impossible. The going was tough towards the top of the mountains where we had to go in for quite a lot of rock scrambling in our search for paths to the summit. On the eighth day we started our descent onto the western side where we split into four

columns. After two further days, I received a signal from Punchy McNeil, whose 7 Troop had stumbled across and destroyed the radio station.

That day his lead scout had heard lower down in the valley a noise which was totally unconnected with jungle activity; it sounded rather like a generator. Punchy put his troop of twelve men into extended order and they slowly crept down the valley alongside a very fast-flowing stream. Suddenly they broke into a clearing and there, to their astonishment, was a twelve-foot diameter water wheel suspended in the torrent. Connected to it was a dynamo which was busily humming away as the wheel rotated. Punchy led his troop into an immediate attack, driving the unsuspecting CTs out the other side of the camp. Not knowing the strength of the opposition, he then took up defensive positions and began to investigate the whole site. There were in fact two twelve-volt generators, feeding power into batteries which were connected to a type 62 radio set. The Squadron had achieved its objective.

I ordered all troops into the area and we started a sweep right up to the Thai border. Permission was requested to cross into Thailand to follow the trails which had obviously been well used by the enemy, but this was refused. It seemed that only the Malay police were allowed over the frontier in follow-up operations, and then only after having been given permission by their Thai counterparts. This was a laborious and unprofessional method of carrying out a follow-up operation, and the time wasted could easily exceed a week. If granted, the Thai police would turn up at the border in their smart uncamouflaged uniforms, making as much noise as possible and thus tipping off the CTs.

After fourteen days we received our first air drop of supplies. It was obvious that all members of the squadron had lost between eight and ten pounds in weight, but the two-week ration had proved a success. All in all we spent two months in the jungle on that operation before returning to base and some well-earned leave. After this welcome interlude, Big Time Bravo became involved in a series of two-month operations, including visits to the Selangor swamps, the inland lake of Tasek Bera and the newly established fort at Iskendar. After that my turn for leave in the UK came round again and I handed over command of the squadron to Major Harry Thompson, a newly arrived officer from the Parachute Regiment. The CO told me that on my return I would take over A Squadron. Before then, however, I was told that I would be in charge of a recruiting campaign throughout England and Wales, assisted by Sergeant Levett. We were issued with a Champ vehicle, a 16mm cine projector and a selection of films shot in the jungle and on the SAS selection course in Wales.

Although Army Council instructions stated quite categorically that commanding officers could not deter members of their units volunteering for the Regiment, many proved reluctant to part with their best NCOs, who had to step back down to private soldier on passing the selection course. In the long run, however, many of those NCOs who made the grade and served a two-year tour with 22 SAS in Malaya returned to their parent units with a higher rank than that which they had relinquished on joining us. During our recruiting tour the largest audience was at Catterick where some six hundred men attended our lecture and film show. However, only nine came forward afterwards to express an interest in volunteering. As approximately five per cent actually passed the selection course in the Brecon Beacons, this will give the reader some idea of the stringent standards applied to ensure that only the very best ended up joining the Regiment.

'Selection', as it is called in the Regiment, has developed over the years, but is basically the same today as it was during the 1950s. The initial period consists of a number of marches across country in the Welsh mountains carrying ever-increasing loads. The tests are

individual ones, pitting the man against the elements and stretching his stamina to the absolute limits. Physical fitness is not enough although necessary – what the training staff are looking for is mental toughness; the ability to keep on going under more and more adverse conditions. Even after passing the basic requirements, there is a lengthy period of specialist training before a man gains the coveted badge and beret.

After five weeks spent recruiting, Sergeant Levett and I returned to Malaya and I took over command of A Squadron. My first taste of action was Operation Ginger which was carried out in the area south of Ipoh, in support of the Commonwealth Brigade, which at that time was commanded by Brigadier Frankie Brooke, brother of Oliver. Our previous CO 3 Troop under Captain Rory Walker (Red Rory) was deployed to the east of the main trunk road and my remaining three troops and headquarters were to the west. Red Rory had located a CT staging post deep in the jungle, which consisted of a raised bamboo platform covered with an attap roof. His Iban trackers informed him that this site was in frequent use, so he decided that it was worth the patience of an SAS lie-up to ensure maximum success. Rory and his men packed the bamboo floor of the post with explosives connected by wires to the detonating mechanism in the ambush position. Two men at a time kept up a constant watch on the target area and the rest of the troop based themselves one hundred metres further back in the jungle. Rory did not permit smoking or cooking, all words of command could only be whispered and crawl line for toilet purposes was established well to the rear of the position.

After about fourteen days of patient vigil, the enemy finally arrived. Trooper O'Brien was on duty at the time, accompanied by one of the Iban trackers, when a party of four Chinese entered the basha (hut). Once they were inside, O'Brien pushed down the plunger of the detonator, but nothing happened. It was obvious that

the constant rain had played havoc with the wiring and he could not signal back to base for fear of alerting the opposition. He thus waited until two of the CTs came out of the building and opened fire with his FN rifle. The CTs were seen to fall, but the others escaped through the rear wall of the basha. The great plus was that one of the men killed was Ah Poy, who was the district committee secretary, a very high-ranking officer in the CT hierarchy. This was a major blow both to the organization and the prestige of the CTs operating in that particular area.

Success bred success. During the following four weeks, A Squadron accounted for a further four terrorists. Two of the latter were killed by Sergeant-Major T.W. James, BEM who had left my headquarters on a short exercise patrol. Rounding a corner on a jungle track he came face to face with two CTs walking towards him. His reflexes were so quick that his carbine was up to his shoulder and both men were shot dead before they could themselves open fire. This was a perfect example of the value of weapons training in such a situation. By then, A Squadron was becoming the envy of the others and I received a signal from Harry Thompson saying, 'Go easy, John, there will be none left for my squadron if you carry on at this rate.' In all, Operation Ginger was a tremendous success. Brigadier Brooke came in by helicopter accompanied by Colonel Deane-Drummond who had taken over command of 22 SAS, to offer his congratulations. As luck would have it, that morning a further CT had been killed by 1 Troop, and the VIPs flew out with the body in their chopper.

Our next operation involved a move north to the Thai border once again to patrol along the Sungai Perak. Warwick Deacock of mountaineering fame had taken over as my second-in-command and another new arrival was Lieutenant Tony Jeapes from the Devon and Dorset Regiment. We covered an enormous area of jungle, sadly without any success whatsoever, often moving along the river in dug-out canoes powered by outboard motors.

After about a month of vigorous patrolling, I received a coded signal from headquarters in Kuala Lumpur that A Squadron would be joining D Squadron for an operation in the Middle East. No further details were given, but we were aware that John Watts had taken D Squadron to a country called Muscat and Oman to put down a rebellion against the ruler.

We were pulled out of the jungle courtesy of the RAF helicopters and returned to base to draw new equipment. This included anoraks and Arctic kit as apparently we were to operate at heights up to eight thousand feet. As it was December, we were told to expect temperatures below freezing. The Squadron moved down to Changi at Singapore by rail and from there flew in two Hermes aircraft of Transport Command to Katunayake, north of Colombo in what was then known as Ceylon. After an overnight stopover we boarded a Valetta and a Beverley which took us on over the Indian Ocean to Oman. We landed at Azaiba, a small oil company airstrip to the east of the Jebel Akhdar (Green Mountain), where we were to join D Squadron, already entrenched there.

9 Arabian assignments

The background to our arrival in January 1959 on the Arabian Peninsula was as follows. The Imam Ghalib, backed by his brother Talib, and with help from Sheikh Suleiman of the Jebel Akhdar and his partner in crime, Issa, had raised the revolutionary flag at Nizwa. Their intention was to depose the Sultan, Said bin Tamur, whose army consisted mainly of Baluchi mercenaries as he mistrusted the local tribes. This force was officered by British expatriates on contract. A year previously a British infantry detachment had been sent from Muscat to put down the rebellion in Nizwa, in what became known as the 'one-shot war'. When this particular force arrived in the vicinity of Nizwa, someone discharged a rifle, apparently by accident, and the Imam decided to carry on his war from the heights of the Jebel, where he set up his HQ in the village of Saiq. He was reckoned to have a hard core of two hundred men backed by a further eight hundred tribesmen owing allegiance to Sheikh Suleiman. From their mountain stronghold, they set up ambushes and blocked off the few approach routes.

The Jebel Akhdar is a high fertile plateau some twenty miles by ten in area with an average height of over six thousand feet. The highest peaks were over ten thousand feet, rising almost vertically from the sweltering desert plain. D Squadron of 22 SAS Regiment had been committed in October 1958. They had managed to effect a toehold on the north-east of the plateau, but it had become obvious that a larger force would be required for an all-out assault. Which was where we came in.

Immediately we arrived at the airstrip near Muscat, we were loaded into three-tonners and motored inland to the desert town of Rostaq. From there we took the road to the oasis of Hijr, a route littered with boulders that reduced our speed to 5 mph. At the village we found that tents had been provided for us by the Trucial Oman Scouts who were there as a back-up force for the British contingent. The latter consisted of the two squadrons of SAS, a squadron of Life Guards and a party of Royal Engineers mainly employed in mine clearance. Those Sappers had the vitally important task of clearing the roads all around the Jebel, as the enemy came down during the night and laid American antitank mines all over the approaches. As the kit was being offloaded, I was summoned to the tent of Colonel Stuart Carter who was in command of the Trucial Oman Scouts. He was a tall impressive soldier who had originated from the Sherwood Foresters, and was most knowledgeable about our enemy and the problems of warfare in the area. He brought me up to date about D Squadron's progress, which had divided up into two parts. Two troops had managed to fight their way up to a plateau about two and a half thousand feet above the oasis of Tanuf. The other two troops under Red Rory Walker and Peter de la Billière had made a much further advance by forcing their way at night up an ancient ascent known as the Persian Steps. The defenders retired to their base to sleep at night, never dreaming that British soldiers would even attempt to move over such difficult terrain in darkness.

Once established on the plateau, the two troops fought their way slowly forward. In one engagement known to regimental history as the Battle of Hawkins Hump, Sergeant Herbie Hawkins' nine-man patrol was attacked by a considerable force of the enemy. Due to his superb fire control and the terrific killing power of the 7.62 FN rifle, this tiny unit repulsed the attack, killing nine of the enemy and no doubt making them wonder what

they had come up against. It was at this stage, however, that further progress towards the summit and Saiq was hindered by a very narrow ridge which was only about five hundred yards wide and had sheer drops on either side. It was overlooked by the commanding heights of the mountain known as Aqubat al Dhufar, which we christened 'Sabrina' owing to its two humps. Aqubat in Arabic means mountain pass, and this was the way to Saiq. In order to make more progress my squadron had been called in.

We left the tented encampment early the following morning carrying enormous loads of up to 60lbs per man. Due to the severity of the winter climate at high altitude we had been issued with Arctic sleeping bags and cold wet weather (CWW) boots. I had handed over the task of leading the squadron to my second-in-command, Warwick Deacock, who had led several expeditions to the Himalayas. He suggested that we would set a pace that would seem to be slow to everyone, but by doing so he estimated that we would gain a thousand feet every two hours. According to Warwick we would reach the foot of the Persian Steps at seven thousand feet before nightfall. The track we followed was a donkey route without any water at all, so strict discipline was needed to conserve supplies. Working as one man and resting every half hour, the squadron reached the foot of the Steps one hour before sunset, where, to our joy, we found a pool of rainwater. After their exhausting trek, the men needed little encouragement to cook up a meal and then flop into their sleeping bags. The following morning we set out to climb the Persian Steps, which had been highly polished by centuries of tribal movement up and down. The actual steps were only wide enough for one man at a time and I realized why the Persians had lost ten thousand men trying to dislodge the Omani tribesmen from the Jebel Akhdar.

At the top we were met by Peter de la Billière who guided us into D Squadron's rear positions, and after

a rest my boys moved forward to relieve the troops in the FDLs (forward defensive locations). On arrival I had noticed two 3in mortars installed behind the D Squadron sangars (rock shelters) and was told that they belonged to a Trucial Oman Scouts detachment commanded by Captain Desmond Cosgrove. It was obvious to me that those heavy weapons would be vitally useful in our eventual attack on 'Sabrina' and I gave immediate orders for our own 3in mortars to be brought up by donkey from Hijr. Each bomb for the mortars weighed 10lbs and to obtain the necessary ammunition it was decided to organize a parachute drop into a small DZ. Bang on time the RAF Valettas came zooming in to drop the hampers loaded with bombs and other supplies. At such heights, turbulent crosswinds caused great problems in accuracy and many of the loads drifted down the mountainside. We did, however, manage to recover the majority of the containers, and it was then that the hard work commenced. Each officer and man had to make two or three visits to the DZ and load up with six bombs in a specially made harness, three on the chest and three on the back, and make the laborious climb back up to our base camp. All other ammunition and supplies had to be man-packed up as the Omani donkey handlers refused to go anywhere near the front line.

The two troops of D Squadron which my men had relieved descended over to the western side of the Jebel to meet up with Johnny Watts at his HQ in Tanuf. From our forward positions I probed forward at night with recce patrols to establish routes for our attack on 'Sabrina'. We were looking for cover from the enemy mortars and machine-guns and intended to move along the ridge lines rather than the defiles which were so subject to covering fire. Over the radio, Johnny Watts told me that our CO, Colonel Deane-Drummond, was coming out from Malaya to take command of the two squadrons in an all-out attack to clear the Jebel Akhdar and dislodge the Imam from Saiq. He arrived in a Twin

Pioneer from RAF Sharjah and, together with Johnny Watts and myself, we carried out a recce of the Jebel. We flew at a reasonable height so as not to give away our purpose, which was to find a route up the Jebel without using the wadis and the established tracks. After about half an hour of cruising around we found that it might be possible to climb up between two deep wadis, but first it would be necessary to scale a peak which we code-named 'Vincent'. From there we would have to drop back down about 1,500 feet before climbing back up onto another feature which we called 'Pyramid'. From there, a small natural causeway connected this part of the mountain to the Saiq Jebel plateau, which if attacked in daylight could be easily defended.

The colonel gave me orders that A Squadron would attack 'Sabrina' and, after taking it, would leave one troop to hold it, to create a diversion and to give the enemy the impression that the attack on Saiq would come from that direction. At the same time, Johnny Watts' men would carry out a similar diversionary attack up the Tanuf plateau and also leave a troop there. The remainder of my squadron would then descend to Tanuf. Then, at night, the six troops of the two combined squadrons would attempt to assault the Jebel via 'Vincent' and 'Pyramid'. To further our deception aims, Malcolm Dennison, the Intelligence chief of the Sultan's Army, leaked information via the Arab donkey handlers that the main assault to capture Saiq would be by way of Aqubat al Dhufar ('Sabrina'), knowing full well that the news would be brought to the Imam within twelve hours.

I considered that it was necessary to do some softening up of 'Sabrina' before our ground forces went in. Our headquarters called in a flight of Shackleton bombers to drop 1,000lb bombs parallel to our front positions onto locations marked by smoke from our 3in mortars. It was quite a sight to see those bombs exploding about fifty feet from the ground, but we later discovered that

the enemy were so well entrenched in caves and sangars that they suffered little damage, except perhaps to their morale. To back up the bombing we had support from the Venoms of 8 Squadron RAF who were stationed at Sharjah. With me I had Flight Lieutenant Morris who was one of their pilots. He was able to talk down the pairs of Venoms onto specific targets which we had pinpointed. The aircraft only had enough fuel to stay above us for about ten minutes but their rockets and machine-gunning were extremely accurate.

On 26 January 1959, at 0300 hours, A Squadron attacked 'Sabrina'. Three troops each took a separate route up a ridge leading to the summit, while the fourth troop manned machine-guns to give covering fire onto the right peak, which was also targeted by the 3in mortars. One hour after the assault commenced, Very pistol flares from the summit informed me that the lads had cleared the left-hand peak. A fierce firefight then developed before the rest of the mountain top was cleared. But by first light, 4 Troop had taken up defensive positions to secure the Aqubat. During the advance, Tony Jeapes with his troop scaled one of the peaks via its highest side and then poured fire down onto the enemy below him, causing them to flee. His only casualty was Corporal Wright, shot in the thigh, but he himself was extremely lucky. As he was jumping over a sangar wall to engage in hand-to-hand fighting, a tribesman rose up and fired at him at point blank range. Astonishingly, the rifle failed to fire, undoubtedly saving his life. For his part in the action, Jeapes was awarded the Military Cross.

As dawn broke, a Sycamore helicopter which I had summoned to evacuate Corporal Wright arrived with the news that Johnny Watts' attack up the Tanuf plateau had advanced against severe opposition. Leaving 4 Troop to hold 'Sabrina' but with orders to retire if severely pressed, I descended with the other three troops to join Johnny at Tanuf. That evening, after a hasty meal

and the necessary 'O' groups, we embarked in three-ton trucks for a jolting rock-strewn ride to the village of Khama. At 2030 hours that night, the squadron started the ascent towards 'Vincent'. In the lead myself, we staggered and stumbled in the dark until we found ourselves standing on top of the ridge. There I halted the lads and we waited for D Squadron to pass through us towards 'Pyramid'. By 0430 hours they had secured their objective and I took my men forward to join them for the assault on Saiq.

When we reached 'Pyramid' we decided that the approach via the causeway would be disastrous, as the enemy had located what looked like a heavy Browning .5 machine-gun covering the route. To deal with this, a three-man party roped down off 'Pyramid', climbed up the other side and, as dawn broke, entered the cave and killed the entire Browning crew. Following fast on their footsteps, D Squadron took the rope route and arrived on the feature known as 'Beer Can'. The SAS were on the Jebel plateau with Saiq in view across the plain. As my squadron followed through, though, tragedy struck. An unlucky shot from a sniper, firing at a range of about five hundred yards, hit an Energa grenade in Trooper Cater's pack which exploded, killing both Cater and his buddy, Trooper Bembridge, who was right behind him. Trooper Hamer was also wounded in the incident, but survived.

At 0800 hours the RAF dropped supplies onto 'Beer Can' to reinforce our last dash into Saiq. The enemy, seeing the parachutes, thought they were reinforcements of airborne troops. The Imam hastily gathered sixty of his hard-core warriors, and as Johnny Watts thrust forward to the village, he descended the Wadi Maidan, commandeered camels in one of the villages and fled into exile in Saudi Arabia. By the time my squadron arrived at Saiq, an airstrip had already been organized. David Smiley, commanding the Sultan's forces, Sayyid Tarik, the Sultan's half-brother and Deane-Drummond were already

there, sorting out the finds from Suleiman's cave which had been discovered by Red Rory Walker. The success of the overall plan and the many diversions had proved that a small but determined force could overcome both the enemy and the extremely hostile terrain, carry enormous loads and still win the day.

Deane-Drummond returned to Malaya, and as senior SAS officer I was put in command of Vector Force to organize mopping up operations across the Jebel Akhdar plateau. Our base was at Bait al Falaj near Muscat and the troops were employed in travelling all the known routes across the Jebel to gain topographical knowledge, conduct censuses of the village populations, discover the water holes and time the various journeys on foot and by donkey. This occupied us until the middle of February, when we regrouped at our base camp. One night, Johnny Watts and I, well primed with beer, decided that the morale of the two squadrons was suffering owing to the inevitable post-attack anti-climax and the fact that we had no details about our eventual return to the UK. In my cups I wrote out a signal to Air Vice-Marshal Heath who was in overall command of British forces in the Arabian Peninsula. This read, 'Vector force has no knowledge of our intended future moves having accomplished our mission, and men's morale lowering as no information forthcoming of our return to U.K. or the present location of their families in Malaya or U.K. Can our position be clarified.' In the sober light of dawn I received a signal from the Air Marshal's headquarters which read, 'Beverley aircraft to be positioned Azaiba to fly Vector Force to Bahrain where Comet aircraft of RAF Transport Command will ferry Force to UK. For Commander Vector Force. In future go through the normal channels.' The news spread like wildfire among the lads, who were becoming genuinely despondent and bored. Soldiers like a clear definition of what they have to do and there is nothing worse than uncertainty. They had been given a task which had been accomplished, but

felt that afterwards the powers that be had forgotten their existence. There were happy faces all around as we packed our kit and prepared to move off. Within a week we were installed back in England at our new base depot at Malvern.

On arrival in Malvern, the Regiment was housed in an old wartime emergency hospital which consisted mainly of corrugated-iron Nissen huts. I handed over my squadron and was reinstalled as operations officer, pending a War Office decision on the future strength of 22 SAS. From rumours circulating, it was apparent that we were to be slimmed down to two squadrons owing to financial restrictions. Just before Christmas 1959, Colonel Deane-Drummond summoned all the officers to a conference to discuss the future. The regiment was to be reduced to two squadrons plus headquarters, which meant that there would be at least three spare majors. Two who were on secondment were returned to their parent regiments, and I, still on the Army List as a member of the SAS, was to be offered a G II appointment at the War Office. It seemed that as I was knocking on for forty I was not to be considered for further operational employment. The problem was that I had never held an administrative position except for a brief period as adjutant of the Green Howards in Cyprus. I had never commanded HQ Squadron, I had had no staff training whatsoever and my only non-executive job had been as operations officer. I mulled over the offer of the staff appointment but finally decided that I was not really cut out for that sort of job.

I quickly got in touch with Colonel David Smiley in Muscat and Oman, and asked if he had a job for me in one of his infantry battalions. I got an immediate reply offering me command of a company in the Northern Frontier Regiment, with a good chance of becoming second-in-command of that unit or of the Muscat Regiment. A condition was, however, that I would have

to take an Arabic course in Aden at the command language school. In January 1960 I bade farewell to the SAS Regiment, fondly imagining that I was severing my connections for all time. How wrong I was to be.

The following three months were spent wrestling with the intricacies of Arabic grammar and script in Aden, but I managed finally to pass out. Journeying north to join the Sultan's Armed Forces, my way took me via Sharjah in the Trucial Oman States where I spent a night in the officers' mess of the Trucial Oman Scouts. Once again I met up with their CO, Colonel Stuart Carter. He invited me into his private study and tried to convince me that I should stay in Sharjah with him. He said that he would arrange with David Smiley for me to transfer to command one of his squadrons. This was all very embarrassing as I had already promised Colonel Smiley that I would be available for service with the Sultan's forces. Carter's signal to Smiley, however, met with a fierce rebuttal and the following morning I was on my way to land at Azaiba – almost a year after I had arrived there from Malaya.

Two days later I arrived at Nizwa where I was met by John Clarke, the second-in-command of the Northern Frontier Regiment. He told me that I was to take over command of C Company stationed at Ibri. At that time, the company consisted almost entirely of Baluchi mercenaries, but would be one of the first to be Arabized. As I had attended the Arabic language course, this was to be my task, assisted by an Arab lieutenant, Said Salem, and a sergeant-major of the same name. During this period of transition we had to cope with numerous mining incidents along our vehicle tracks. They were laid by the Oman Liberation Army operating out of Saudi Arabia. This guerilla activity caused us many casualties, and one month alone we suffered nine explosions. Also at the time, my old B Squadron of 22nd SAS Regiment arrived for desert training and was stationed at Ibri. They carried out a whole series of patrols in our area, receiving their fair share of mines in the process. Harry Thompson

and his lads stayed with me for about two weeks, and we visited the Jebel stronghold of Saiq where we re-enacted the attack on the rebels. The visit whetted my appetite for the SAS life, and, unbeknown to me at the time, I was soon to return to operations.

My next posting was as second-in-command of the Muscat Regiment under its commander, Colonel Clive Chettle. One day late in May 1963, quite out of the blue, I received a telegram from Muscat which had taken two days by Land Rover to reach me. It was from David Stirling and read: 'Please join me in Aden soonest possible', but with no further details. It was impossible for me to fly direct as there were no commercial connections south of Muscat. I therefore radioed Muscat asking HQ to send a reply that I could not carry out his request even if I were to be granted leave, but I suggested that I could reach Bahrain as there was a plane once a week. An answer from Colonel David came by return saying: 'Meet me soonest Speedbird Hotel Bahrain'. I asked for an interview with Colonel Hugh Oldman who was then commanding the Sultan's armed forces and requested time off to be deducted from my leave, to visit my old CO. The colonel was most helpful and immediately granted my request. The following Friday I flew to Bahrain with instructions to contact Captain Philip Horniblow who was the medical officer to 21st SAS Regiment TA, who would brief me.

When I got to the Speedbird Hotel, the only information that the doctor would impart was that I was to lead an Anglo-French expedition into a middle-eastern country to obtain military information of vital interest to the two nations concerned. Late that night, Colonel David came bounding in and told me that I was to go back to Muscat as quickly as possible and obtain leave for a month, telling Colonel Oldman that the British Government was involved in my move. Back at base I saw the colonel and his Intelligence adviser, Captain

Malcolm Dennison, who had been a liaison officer with the SAS in the Jebel Akhdar campaign several years earlier. It was decided that as a screen, Colonel Oldman would send me a telegram saying that my mother was dying and that I would be granted one month's compassionate leave. Only he himself and Malcolm Denison would know the real reason for my departure.

On 5 June 1963 I arrived in London and was whisked off to meet Jim Johnson who had just finished a stint in command of 21 SAS T.A. There, David Stirling joined us and the whole party flew to Paris on 6 June, my birthday, to attend a meeting in the Bois de Boulogne at the house of Pierre de Bourbon-Parma. The whole city was busy celebrating the D–Day anniversary but I had little time to enjoy my birthday. We sat around a table into the early hours of the morning with high-ranking officials and even government ministers from both Britain and France. Finally I began to get a clearer picture of what was involved in this clandestine expedition. On 26 September 1962, the ruler of North Yemen, the Imam Mohammed al-Badr, was overthrown in a coup by Colonel Abdullah al-Sallal, Chief of Staff of his Army. The Imam escaped from his capital Sa'ana and took refuge in the mountains where he organized a Royalist army of Zeidi tribesmen backed by neighbouring Saudi Arabia. Sallal proclaimed the Yemen Arab Republic which was promptly granted strong military support by Egypt's President Nasser, who at the time was busily fomenting left-wing Arab nationalism throughout the Middle East. Nasser's hostility was principally directed against conservative religious rulers like the Imam. Britain and France were both concerned at the turn of events in Yemen and at the spread of Nasser's influence generally. It had therefore been decided at top level to send in a mission to determine the extent to which Sallal's government depended on Egyptian military support. In fact the Yemen civil war was to continue for nearly seven years of hard and bloody fighting.

My brief was to lead a party of four French and four British professional soldiers into the mountains of North Yemen above the capital, Sa'ana, to establish contact with the Royalist Fifth Yemen Army commanded by Prince Abdullah bin Hassan, and to ascertain the level of Egyptian military backing. Neither Britain nor France was prepared to recognize the revolutionary government until the position had been clarified regarding the Egyptian involvement. On returning to London, I had an interview with the Royalist Ambassador to Britain, Ahmed Hamed Shami, who told me that our entry point would be from Aden. The following few days were occupied in putting in my shopping list of weapons, ammunition and other stores to Jim Johnson, for myself and the three SAS men who would be joining me. The French, whose party would consist of two Deuxième Bureau (Intelligence) operatives and two colonial officers were to supply their own equipment.

The next job was to collect my three stalwarts from the Regiment. I contacted John Woodhouse, who was then commanding 22 SAS at Hereford, and he gave me the names of the three volunteers who had been granted one month's leave to join the expedition. They were Sergeant Geordie Dorman, a Malaya veteran and a fine mortar expert, Corporal Chigley who had been a medical orderly with me in B Squadron, and finally, Trooper Richardson, an all-round firearms expert. As this was a clandestine job and the men were officially on leave, I was provided with a hire car by Jim Johnson and motored down to the Hereford area. During the night I collected the three lads at various map references and we all returned to Johnson's flat in London. The following morning, as we were busily packing all our kit, the Profumo affair broke. The then Minister of War, John Profumo, had become involved with a certain young woman and was forced to resign, creating considerable embarrassment for the Conservative government of Harold Macmillan. Colonel David was informed by the Foreign Office tha

our trip would have to be cancelled as the government could not handle any more political embarrassment. He, however, was adamant that we should depart as planned, especially as we had promised the Yemeni Royalists and had already received considerable finance from the ambassador. It was decided that we would leave on the Sunday night and travel by different routes. I was to go via Italy and meet up with the three SAS lads in the Libyan capital Tripoli. From there we would catch the Comet with the French group on board and continue to Aden.

There was an amusing incident in the departure lounge at Tripoli airport that nearly blew the whole mission, literally! We had just collected our baggage from our various incoming flights, when one of the cases broke open, spilling out rolls and rolls of plastic explosive. Some of the Libyan security guards actually helped us to repack the stuff, little realizing what it was they were handling. But we sat tight and waited for the Comet. When it arrived we climbed aboard and met up with the Frenchmen who were already on the flight. On arrival in Aden we were met by a gentleman from the Governor's office who told us to stay where we were. The pilot of the Comet had obviously been told that we were 'special' and that we would be collected by the British authorities. Lo and behold, after about twenty minutes, a DC-3 of Aden Airways taxied alongside with its engines still running. We rushed down the steps from the Comet, ran across the tarmac and climbed on board.

Taking off again, we were told that we would be landing at the town of Beihan close to the Yemeni border, which the Egyptians had started bombing in a series of raids against settlements in the area. Stationed around the Beihan airstrip was a British anti-aircraft regiment, and as we climbed out of the aircraft I turned to the French group and said, 'I am not going to speak English, you must speak French.' There was no point in giving the game away at that stage, British regiment or

not. So, we all chatted away, or at least they did and I did the best I could with my limited French. A truck arrived to pick us up and we drove to the British camp where a lot of officers tried in vain to find out who we were. As none of them spoke French, we got away with it. From there we drove up to Nakoub, only fifteen miles from the border with Yemen, where we stayed at the house of the Shérif of Beihan. There we were issued with Arab clothing and were told that very early the following morning we would be going in. So, after packing our kit ready for the trek, we turned in for an early night.

In the morning we were taken to a lying-up area right on the border where some camels were waiting crouched down. After loading the beasts, the eight of us set out as part of a huge caravan of about a hundred and fifty camels carrying weapons and supplies northwards to the Royalists. As darkness fell that night we padded our way over the border into North Yemen at the start of what was to be a long and arduous penetration march. Because of Egyptian air activity it was necessary to travel at night, and during the days we holed up and camouflaged ourselves in the camel scrub. The camels themselves were cut loose and sent off to graze, while all the kit was off-loaded to be hidden from prying Egyptian reconnaissance aircraft. It took almost three weeks to reach the Khowlan, the mountainous region around the capital, Sa'ana. Our biggest obstacle on the trek was Sirwah, where a large Egyptian garrison was stationed whose job it was to stop the camel caravans from getting through. My colleagues, who had no experience of riding camels, developed terribly sore backsides and preferred to walk. To get through the Sirwah defences we had to cross three or four minefields, but the Yemeni guides had sussed these out extremely well. The long line of animals passed through, walking in each other's steps in single file. Leaving Sirwah behind we entered the mountains which were free from Republican and Egyptian domination, but we still had to beware of

helicopters and recce aircraft which constantly cruised around.

On arrival in the Khowlan, word was sent forward to Prince Abdullah bin Hassan, the army commander, and as we approached the village of Gara, up a wadi, we met him and his tribesmen with great pomp and ceremony. They were all mountain men, quite a tough crowd, and were part of an army which could put sixty thousand rifles of assorted types into the field. Abdullah bin Hassan was interested in us not only on account of the arms we were bringing, but because our organization had promised that we would evaluate the position, give him support where necessary, and even call in air drops of items he required to continue his fight.

We settled in with Abdullah and decided that we should start reconnaissance trips as soon as possible. I sent Dorman and Chigley off with one party, while Richardson and I took the other, to investigate the disposition of Egyptian forces. These were only short expeditions; ten-mile hikes to acclimatize ourselves to the high altitude. It soon became apparent that the Egyptians only held the low ground around Sa'ana and they were unwilling to move out of their enclaves and go into the neighbouring settlements. On our return we witnessed the first Egyptian air raid on Gara. Three Soviet-built Ilyushin 28s dropped bombs and fired off 20mm rockets, followed by piston-engined Yak fighters armed with rockets and machine-guns. The latter were extremely manoeuvrable and could get right down into the wadis. Later we were to see Egyptians dropping poison gas bombs and napalm.

Having made our preliminary reconnaissance we decided that the time had come for action. Our plan was to lay a few mines, tickle up the opposition so that they would attack us, and then lead them into a prearranged killing ground. Little did we know what a big operation this was going to become. We had already started training the Yemenis on the weapons which we had brought in,

concentrating on the Bren which is one of the simplest firearms for use by guerrillas. We organized them into small groups of between five and seven men each, as gun sections or killing groups. Because of the language problem – the Yemeni hill dialects are very difficult even with a good knowledge of Arabic – we did not go into tactics at all. We restricted ourselves to showing them how to get down behind the gun, how to make the best use of cover, how long to fire bursts and how to avoid overheating the barrel. Purely the basics of a first-time soldier. In fact, they were pretty good and knew how to keep their heads down and survive.

After that basic training we set up an ambush in the Wadi Thoul to the east of Sa'ana. This particular wadi narrowed down and then split into a 'Y' junction up a steep slope where there was a small area of level ground about fifty yards across. The arms of the 'Y' petered out into steep rocky escarpments and were unassailable. We positioned the gun sections in foxholes in three well-camouflaged spots protected by rocks, which overlooked the level area or killing ground. Each position had a 'funk hole' to the rear for when the real 'shit' came in.

At about 0900 hours the Egyptians moved into the wadi in considerable strength with a parachute battalion leading, followed by T–34 tanks and light artillery. They were unaware of our presence further up the valley, and about half-way up the tanks and artillery halted. The infantry, burdened with a lot of bulky kit and dragging Soviet heavy machine-guns on wheels, advanced shoulder to shoulder in a tightly packed extended order. The Royalist gun sections' orders were to hold their fire until the Egyptians were well onto the killing ground below our positions and we had piled up stone cairns to act as an aiming guide. As the enemy reached our markers, our men opened up with devastating effect, knocking down the closely packed infantry like ninepins. Panic broke out in the ranks behind and then the tanks started firing, not into our positions but among their own men. Then the

light artillery opened up, causing further carnage.

For the rest of the day the Egyptians kept firing onto our hill, but we were well protected in the 'funk holes'. As night fell they retreated back towards Sa'ana with a very bloody nose indeed. We counted eighty-five bodies which were left where they fell, remaining there for some two years before an agreement was reached to permit the Red Cross to collect the skeletons. The weapons and equipment left behind by the Egyptians, radios, heavy and light machine-guns, small arms, etc., were collected up and handed over to the Royalist Fifth Army quartermasters who stored them in the caves for further use.

Our next bout of action against the Egyptians was very different but equally successful. We were given information that there was an enemy garrison of about two companies in strength situated on a hill which was beautifully overlooked by still higher ground. This encampment was supplied by helicopter and the whole area was surrounded by barbed wire and mines. Their tents were well protected behind sangars and it was quite clear that the occupants had no intention of venturing forth on patrols. We went forward for a recce with field glasses and soon realized that the outpost was ideal for a mortar attack, a beautiful soft target. Richardson, Dorman and I loaded up three camels with bombs and the mortar, and took four Yemeni lads along as bodyguards in case we ran into trouble with the local tribesmen. We set out very early in the morning so as to be in position by first light. On the way we did encounter opposition from some of the locals who thought that if we stirred up the Egyptians their villages would be bombed yet again. But our guides managed to convince them that we had to give the outpost a going over.

When we reached the position we had selected, we put one man higher up on the hill above with a direction finder: a stick held up in the hand so that the mortar crew could get the line. The maps we had did not give

us much idea of the range, but Dorman was an expert and could use the man on the hill to give a line. We got the mortar set up and waited for dawn. The Egyptians were just getting out of bed all sleepy-eyed when we opened fire. I think that it was the second round that landed inside their perimeter and then Dorman banged away about thirty more bombs. Observed from the top, the panic was fantastic. It was obvious that the enemy thought they had been attacked by a force of infantry as they started to blaze away in all directions. It was quite some time before their artillery started to follow up the wadi behind, but such was their state of turmoil that by then we were three or four miles away. They even kept on shelling the wrong valley for the whole of the rest of the day. We had no idea of the casualties we had caused, but watching through the glasses the confusion we had caused was worth it. When the bombs had all been used up, we packed the mortar tube and baseplate on the camels and headed back to base.

By then, however, time was beginning to run out on us. The three SAS lads had outstayed their leave and I guessed that I had probably incurred the displeasure of my employers in Oman. If it took us as long to get out of the Yemen as it had taken us to get in, we still had a long stint ahead of us. Another factor was that I had to leave as soon as possible to report on the Egyptian order of battle. Abdullah bin Hassan was very reluctant to let us go, but I assured him that I would return as soon as possible and hopefully would be able to arrange to start air dropping supplies. My report would indicate that the Egyptian Army was quite clearly running the whole show.

On our long walk to the South Yemen border we had mixed fortunes. We were quite close to Marib when we began to run short of water and, to complicate matters, a violent sand storm blew up. Not really knowing where we were we crouched down in a shallow wadi among the camel scrub hoping to ride out the storm. We only had

a mouthful of water left amongst us, but luckily one of the leaders of our Yemeni escort announced that he was going to try to collect some water from a nearby Egyptian outpost. His sheer audacity most probably saved our lives, because the storm increased in intensity throughout the day.

Using our SAS training in water conservation and discipline, the four of us managed to eke out our remaining few drops, although our Yemeni fellows kept trying to invade us under the camel scrub to plead for our water. As nightfall approached, the storm abated somewhat and I moved about fifty yards up to the wadi to await our Gunga Din. After a while I heard movement and fired two shots in the air from my pistol to notify him of our presence. As soon as he arrived, the tribesmen gathered round gobbling up the water from the goatskin bags, spilling many pints of the precious liquid in the process. They had simply no idea of the concept of water rationing. Allah had produced it so they drank it.

With our water bottles full once more we crouched down for the night and slowly the storm eased until it finally stopped completely at around midnight. Stars came out and all was peace and quiet. At dawn I moved out of our position and climbed up the side of the wadi. Peering towards the east I saw to my utter amazement, about a thousand yards away, the Federation Army frontier post which we had passed on our way into North Yemen. We were home and dry. The local force commander sent off immediate signals to HQ in Aden and transport arrived to take us to Nakoub. From there we were airlifted down to Aden and put on the first available aircraft to the U.K.

The first job on arrival home was a complete debrief with Colonel David and Jim Johnson, plus various members of our Intelligence service. It soon became obvious that the diplomats realized that the Egyptians' interests lay not in Aden and the South Yemen, but rather in destabilizing Saudi Arabia to the north. Their eyes were

fixed on the latter's oilfields it seemed, and hence Saudi backing for our mission and financial support for the Royalists. Although the Frenchmen had stayed behind at their own request, it was clear that we would need radios to pass on the vital information about Egyptian operations and the strength of their forces, which were being substantially reinforced.

I was sent to Dartford in Kent to collect some very up-to-date 'ham' radio equipment from K.W. Electronics which was packed into foam-lined wooden carrying cases for the journey back into North Yemen. I was asked to return in command of the expedition, but to provide me with some semblance of cover I was given a 16mm Bolex cine camera with tripod. Thus I could pose as a cameraman; the subsidiary purpose was for me to try to film Egyptian bombing of villages with napalm and poison gas. This would provide proof for Billy Maclean, veteran of operations in Albania during the war and then MP for Inverness, who had been writing articles on the subject.

Duly weighed down by all this equipment and having paid vast sums for excess baggage, I departed for Aden by the regular Comet aircraft. Unfortunately, while in the air over Cyprus, the pilot informed us that we would be making an unscheduled landing in Cairo at the request of the Egyptian aviation authorities. No further reason was given. We duly landed at Al Masa airport and taxied onto the parking area, where, when the doors were opened, an Egyptian employee of BOAC came on board. He said that a Mr Cooper would have to be off-loaded as the aircraft was overweight and further passengers were due to be embarked.

I immediately buttonholed the air hostess and asked to speak to the captain as a matter of urgency. In the cockpit I told him that I was a security risk if the Egyptians got hold of me, because of my activities in Yemen. He agreed to keep me on board and said that there was a spare crew seat next to the radio operator. I was to sit there and

he would try to sort things out. I stayed in the cockpit for about a quarter of an hour, but then the Egyptian authorities came on board and insisted that I leave the aircraft. The only reason that I could think of was that the Egyptians knew of my connection with operations in Yemen and were intending to arrest me.

In the arrivals lounge I was approached by some men whom I assumed were Egyptian intelligence officers. They told me that my luggage would go on with the plane but that I would have to stay in Cairo and wait for the next one to Aden in three or four days time. They searched my hand luggage as well as the camera case, but only God knows the reason why they missed letters from Said Ahmed Shami, the Yemeni ambassador in London to the Imam and to Abdullah bin Hassan. Both had been slipped between pages in the instruction manual for the Bolex and would surely have been found by any competent searcher. Discovery of the letters would have brought my mission to an extremely rapid conclusion. I refused to leave the lounge until I had seen the senior BOAC representative in Cairo, and when he duly appeared he apologized for any inconvenience, saying that I would be put up in a hotel. I replied: 'Yes, I will stay at Shepheards Hotel – the new one as I believe you burnt the old one down.' At this, one of the intelligence officers said: 'Oh, you know Egypt, do you?' I replied that I had fought there for three years during the desert campaign and had also returned there during the Greek campaign in 1947. This was my third, although unplanned, visit.

BOAC provided me with transport and without any check by Customs I was whisked away and deposited in the new Shepheards, by the English Bridge on the Nile. I was accompanied by the Egyptian BOAC representative the whole way, and in the car I explained that I was due at a conference in Aden and asked him to send a telex to my London office to say that I had been delayed through no fault of my own. I also indicated that the airline would

have to pay my hotel bill and other requirements, to which he agreed. During the next three days at the hotel, my room was systematically searched daily, although my camera case was not interfered with. I made a point of eating à la carte and did not venture outside, spending my time between the bar and the restaurant. On the day of my onward journey, I was once again collected by the supposed airline representative, who by then I assumed to be a member of Egyptian Intelligence, and was put on board the aircraft without further hitches. I arrived in Aden all smiles and with many sighs of relief.

My return to the Khowlan mountains was uneventful that time and comparatively fast, although the Yemenis used me as a gold carrier. Behind my camel was another one tied on, loaded with sovereigns and half-sovereigns to pay Abdullah bin Hassan's forces. Apparently the local tribesmen were far too distrustful of each other to carry the gold, and as a precaution, in front of my group was a decoy caravan with gold bags full of stones. When I eventually reached Abdullah and handed over the gold, he greeted me by my code name, Abdullah bin Nasser, and said with a wry smile on his face that he would not need to check the consignment. In the encampment I met up with the French contingent again, which had been reduced to the two Deuxième Bureau men we called Peter and Paul. Together we constructed a radio shack on the hill above Gara, built into the side of the rock, and suspended our co-axial aerial over the mountainside. We were at just over 9,000 feet and our first transmission to Aden was excellent because of our wonderful position. Sadly, however, we were not to enjoy our reunion for very long. The Egyptians must have located our transmitter with a direction finder, as they mounted a chemical attack on the Royalist Army HQ to eliminate the foreign element that they knew existed.

Early one morning at about six o'clock, I wandered

down the valley towards the bombed-out village of Gara for my usual constitutional and to deal with the call of nature. As I squatted among the rocks I heard the approach of more than one aircraft and looking up to the sky I saw two Ilyushin-built versions of the DC–3 banking over the caves that housed our headquarters. My first thought was that it was a napalm attack to snuff out those inside the caves, but then I saw silvery cylinders being pushed out of the doors of both aircraft. They tumbled to the ground and burst open, dispersing a white cloud which filled the bottom of the wadi. Other cylinders hit the mountainside near our radio station. I ran back up the wadi and on arriving at the first cave noticed dozens of tribesmen staggering out holding their eyes and yelling for help. I bumped into Peter who said that it was a gas attack and that he was going up to the radio station to see if there had been any damage. He disappeared up the mountainside. When he had not returned after half an hour, I climbed up myself to see what had happened to him. I discovered him sitting beside the radio shack saying quietly that he was blind. One of the gas cylinders had broken the aerial and he had clambered up to mend it. Where the bomb had landed the whole area of the ground was coated with a black gooey substance that was still giving off vapour. I did not go near it, but it was obvious that it was a compound of mustard and nerve gas, which on later analysis proved to be the case.

Helping Peter back down to where Paul was waiting, we tried to do our best for him, but the only thing we had in the first aid pack was a bottle of Optrex. This was of no use whatsoever and slowly his eyelids closed, leaving him totally blind. At the same time there were dozens of tribesmen in the same predicament and we could do little to relieve their agony. Abdullah arranged for them to be evacuated and I asked him for a caravan to take Peter and Paul down to Nakoub so that he could be given treatment in a hospital in France. I heard later

that Peter did get back his eyesight partially, but he never fully recovered from the effects of the gassing. His courage in sitting backwards astride a camel for two weeks, blind and not knowing what was going on around him, was a great tribute to the Deuxième Bureau.

Thus I found myself on my own and for the following nine months was to remain so. The radio, however, was a great companion, but the problem was to find batteries, get them charged and to obtain petrol for the charging set which I had brought with me from Aden. Slowly I built up a complete intelligence picture of the Egyptian orbat (order of battle) with all their units and commanders down to battalion level. I also crated up and sent out by camel caravan an advanced Russian radio which had not previously been seen by Western intelligence agencies. It was urgently needed by our technical people for evaluation, but four months later, a caravan bringing in supplies returned the radio to me in its crate with a note pinned on the outside for Abdullah bin Nasser. The note read: 'Hoping that this will be of great use to you.' In fact the Royalist agents in Nakoub had failed to open it or send it on to the British Intelligence in Aden. So I duly sent it back again and that time it finally arrived at its true destination. I found out later that MI6 had been very interested in the radio and had expressed the wish that I would produce further up-to-date Russian kit that might fall into my hands during forthcoming operations.

I spent my time sorting out Abdullah's headquarters command, making lists of equipment needed and preparing for the first reinforcements which it was hoped would arrive in February 1964. After that I could prepare for the first air-dropped supplies and then incite Abdullah's forces to take on a more aggressive role. My life was broken down into three distinct forms of activity. First, intelligence gathering and training the Army. Second, setting up a medical team, the supplies for which would be received from the Yemeni Relief

Fund which had been set up by Lady Birdwood. This involved setting up certain first aid posts in the future operational areas. Third, the mining of the main track roads used by Egyptian armoured columns, to create alarm and despondency among the forces of occupation.

Life consisted to a large extent of avoiding the attentions of the Egyptian Air Force which continuously bombed all villages and water points, and even indulged in strafing the donkeys which were the main Royalist mode of transport in the rugged terrain. To avoid the bombing and strafing we tended to remain either in the caves during daylight or moved into desolate areas well away from habitation. I did not relish being caught up in a cave after the experience of the gas bombing, so most days I walked out into the mountains and watched the air activity from afar. I also used my Bolex camera to film many of the air raids.

At night the majority of the Yemenis indulged in the chewing of qat, which consisted of the choice green shoots and leaves plucked from small trees about the size of an orange bush. The leaves were then rolled into a small ball which was inserted into the side of the mouth, and chewed like gum with constant amounts of water to keep the qat moist. This gave the user a 'high' comparable to a large quantity of marijuana and was accompanied by incessant cigarette smoking. The Yemenis therefore remained awake through most of the night with an increasing feeling of strength both morally and physically, and by the early hours of the morning they were openly bragging about what they would do to the Egyptians and the Republicans the following day. Unfortunately the effects tended to wear off by about four o'clock in the morning, upon which the chewers fell sound asleep and remained so until midday. I could not endure staying in the cave at night, so I found my own funk hole into which to disappear when the qat parties commenced. A lot of money was spent on the stuff, as it was extremely expensive. The gardens where the

drug was grown were usually guarded round the clock by the owners who did not hesitate to shoot at anyone approaching unless they were accredited customers.

Our feeding arrangements were extremely primitive. Every morning unleavened bread was issued to all, and every ten days or so a cow or some goats were slaughtered to provide a ration of vile-tasting tough meat stew. This was dished out on the lines of a soup kitchen, and unbeknown to myself I contracted a severe case of tuberculosis. This was hardly surprising as all eating utensils, cups, etc. were passed around and about sixty per cent of the tribesmen were infected. I only found this out when I was medically examined after my three years in the Yemen.

Medical work was both enjoyable and satisfying. Through Lady Birdwood we were supplied with ample amounts of the necessary drugs, dressings and other items, which reached us via camel caravan. At one stage Lady Birdwood flew out to Aden herself to arrange for the clandestine release of a consignment of medical supplies that had been impounded by the RAF. She had arranged through her many contacts for the RAF to fly the supplies out but some local quartermaster impounded them as there was no accompanying paperwork. So one night, she and Tony Boyle, the Governor's aide-de-camp, broke into the store, selected the most valuable drugs and arranged for them to be shipped up to me in the mountains.

Together with a young Yemeni boy, Ahmed, I set up a small clinic under a tree in one of the nearby wadis. Soon the word got around and men, women and children came from miles around to receive treatment. The odd thing was that they all wanted an injection, for in the Arab mind there must be pain attributed to a cure. Many of their local cures known as 'woosam' were carried out by burning and I found it impossible to administer antibiotic pills without at the same time pushing a needle into their arms or legs. Later we were to have a radio doctor based

in Aden, which enabled us to carry out some interesting operations, even to the extent of setting a broken leg. As the news of our medical activities spread further and further afield, Abdullah bin Hassan asked me to visit many wounded tribesmen who could not make the trip to our dressing station. So I began a weekly tour of those casualties, moving over the mountains and sometimes covering fifteen miles in a day.

Ahmed had become quite an efficient medical orderly, although he had originally been allotted to me as a body-guard. He was about fifteen years old and when the butt of his rifle was resting on the ground the tip of the muzzle reached well over his head. He became quite proficient in giving injections. Regular doses of vitamins were vitally important, especially during the period before regular air drops started. At one stage I was down in weight to eight and a half stone. By a stroke of luck, however, I managed to get hold of some Lyle's Golden Syrup which apparently could be purchased in Sa'ana. The locals had no desire at all to eat it, so I lived virtually on unleavened bread and syrup.

Our road mining activities were directed against the rough tracks in the valleys below Sa'ana and which ran back to Taiz and Hodeida. The roads were used by the Egyptian supply columns which normally had tank escorts out in front, thus considerably increasing our chances of damaging both armoured vehicles and the morale of their crews. Had the roads been tarmaced we would have had far more difficulty in placing our mines. Nearly all the ones we used were American-made, left over from the war and still in boxes daubed with the lend-lease symbol of the handshake. Prince Abdullah bin Hassan supplied some very enthusiastic tribesmen to lay the mines, but at a price! After training I would interview each mine layer personally, show him five gold sovereigns which were the price for the job, and give him two of them. The rest he would get only after final proof

that he had laid the mine and that it had exploded. I paid another crew to watch the results, and of course with typical Arab exaggeration there were always ten or fifteen Egyptians killed. That aspect of mining operations did not really interest me. My aim was to blow the tracks off the Russian-built T–34 tanks, which kept the Egyptian workshops busy and consumed valuable spare parts. Their tanks would often be off the road for months at a time which caused considerable frustration and anxiety among the commanders of armoured regiments.

My intelligence work also went well: I completed a full orbat (order of battle) of the Egyptian Army and Air Force presence in the country. They had built up their forces to well over a hundred thousand men, so the task was a detailed one. Through my agents I gained the numbers of formations, the names of their commanding officers, their locations and even when they had arrived in the Yemen. I also concentrated on studying their defensive tactics and their use of anti-personnel mines. When this orbat was completed I sent it back to Aden for evaluation. About a month later I received a very appreciative signal from the senior MI6 person who we referred to as 'our friend'.

Shortly afterwards I received information that my first reinforcements were on the way, one of whom was Sergeant Cyril Weavers. He came from 21 SAS and was attached to the SAS signals squadron. As a qualified morse operator he would be able to ensure adequate communications when the time came to take our first air drop, codenamed 'Mango'. He was accompanied by Lieutenant David Bailey, a national service officer who had served with the Royal Sussex Regiment. I discovered that he had been pestering Billy Maclean to let him come out to help me as his personal effort to aid the Royalist cause. In February 1964, the two new arrivals staggered into our camp at Gara and we were able to start to prepare for our first 'Mango' drop for the Royalist Fifth Army.

When I told the Royalist commander about the forthcoming air drops, he was over the moon. I was careful, however, not to tell him of their place of origin, restricting myself to the information that the supplies would be sent in by 'the Europeans'. To make absolutely sure that my radio communications with Aden were absolutely secure, I used a simple but effective code based on two French dictionaries. The messages went out with each word encoded as a series of figures. The first digit in a series, either 01 or 02, referred the translator on the other end to one of the dictionaries. Subsequent numbers pointed him to a page, then a column and finally the word I wanted to send. Thus, for example, 0143218 indicated dictionary 01, page 43, column 2, line 18. It was an old and laborious ruse, especially as I first had to translate my messages into French, but it worked. If an enemy intercepted the messages and did not know which books were being used, he had virtually no chance of cracking the code. I was also transmitting on the edge of the amateur band and at random intervals – we avoided fixed schedules – to confuse any would-be eavesdroppers.

With the arrival of Weavers we had two radios and we started working separately. I put Bailey in one area and kept Weavers with me. The actual reason for the strict blanket of security surrounding the planned air drops was that they were in fact being operated by a 'friendly' Air Force. If this had become known, the political repercussions would have defied description. We started to set up a test for the 'Mango' communications and although at first we could not always hear the 'suppliers' on the other end, the links rapidly improved. They were extremely concerned that the whole operation should run like clockwork, and before they would consider proceeding, asked for a complete breakdown of my experience of receiving air drops. Fortunately I was an old hand at the business, having run reception committees in France in 1944 and in Malaya. In addition I had done a variety of courses on lighting, communications and other procedures. All this seemed to satisfy our friendly suppliers that I could handle the job competently.

To make the drops, they had converted a Stratocruiser with a roll-off exit at the rear for pushing out the containers. At our end the facilities were less sophisticated. The only lighting gear we could muster to light the DZ was a pair of car headlamps running off old batteries and a series of petrol and diesel fires. As the DZ itself was only four hundred yards long, the pilots were going to have to be extremely accurate.

During the week running up to the first drop we were in contact with the suppliers on a four-hourly basis to make sure that our communications equipment was working at all times, right up to the moment the aircraft took off. On the night of the first drop, the Stratocruiser flew down the Red Sea with Egypt on the right and Saudi Arabia on the left. They had to come in almost at sea level to avoid detection by Egyptian radar, and when they reached the port of Hodaida, they swung inland towards the mountains, climbing to 10,000 feet. Throughout the flight strict radio silence was maintained until the aircraft gained height, when the message was sent: 'We are approaching. Will be with you in ten minutes.' Shortly after that I received the signal to light the fires. On went the headlamps and David Bailey lit the beacons. Then we heard: 'Got your visual. Dummy run.' The Stratocruiser came in low over the flarepath and then turned away. Our friends had muffled the engines and it was very quiet. Then the huge aircraft came in for the actual drop and as it swept over at about two hundred and fifty feet, sixty parachutes spewed out from the back. It was a beautifully executed professional drop. As he started to pull away, the pilot radioed, 'Last parachute for you. Report.' 'Bull's-eye,' I replied. Then he said, 'Best of luck. Cheerio.' That was the last communication we had as the aircraft disappeared for the long flight up the Red Sea and back to its base.

Everybody on the ground went wild. They had bullock

carts out collecting the containers and getting them away under cover. The following morning the Egyptians had a recce aircraft up over the mountains, but they were not looking in the right place. It was obvious that they had heard or seen something in the night and had been alerted to the presence of an aircraft, but where it had gone remained a mystery. Abdullah bin Hassan was delighted. He had the mortars and bombs he needed together with a plentiful supply of small arms, including German Schmeisser sub-machine-guns. The source of these weapons was brilliantly concealed. Every serial number had been scored out, the parachutes were of Italian origin and even the wood shavings used in the packing had been imported from Cyprus. Even the most expert intelligence analyst would have had a job to unravel that one. The last container to be dropped carried our personal mail, English newspapers and even a bottle of Scotch. A superb gesture! I had not touched alcohol for over a year and the whisky tasted absolutely vile. But David, Cyril and I sat in our little hideout, devoured the entire bottle and then fell asleep.

The lesson learnt from this first drop was that the large number of small containers tended to get very spread out in the turbulent mountain winds, which made collection difficult. It was vital to get everything away before first light, and our planners changed the loading method to use twelve large loads per flight. To set all this up I was requested by Jim Johnson to return to Britain. On arrival in Nakoub I was met by Ralph Daly and Bill Heber-Percy of MI6 for a thorough debrief, which was followed by an equally thorough haircut and beard trim: I was then flown down to Aden for a further long discussion with John da Silva. After two days there I departed for England, to find myself in the centre of a storm of press speculation.

An article was published in the *Sunday Times* on 5 July 1964 and reproduced five letters sent to me in the desert which I had never received. The newspaper had apparently picked up the story from the Egyptian

newspaper, *Al Ahram*. One letter was from my local branch of Barclays Bank in Ongar, Essex, and dealt with purely personal matters. Another was from Lady Birdwood thanking me for a letter I had written to her concerning the medical supplies which she had organized for us, and from which I quote. . . .

18 November 1963

Dear Major Cooper,

I was very glad to receive your letter of 1st October and to hear all the news from your end.

You must be having a very tough time of it, and I hope the Yemenis will at least offer you a seat in any future cabinet! Seriously, they must be enormously grateful to you and I look forward one day to meeting you and hearing a full account of your work. I hope your own health is standing up well because I know how grim the food etc. is . . .

The other three concerned operational matters. One was from Tony Boyle, written from David Stirling's London address, introducing Bailey and Weavers. By that stage, Tony had been medically discharged from the RAF and was working on the Yemeni operation under Jim Johnson. All this gave Nasser a valuable propaganda victory and even soured relations between the Americans and the British Government – who naturally denied all knowledge of our activities.

When I awoke that Sunday morning I did not see a newspaper until I went to my local pub, the White Hart in Moreton, Essex. Once there, I decided that the best way to avoid the hordes of journalists who were converging on the village was to stay in the pub. By one o'clock the whole village was swarming with reporters clamouring for a story. Luckily I was with a crowd of friends who never gave my presence away. My house opposite was completely surrounded by telephoto lenses, and in the evening, many of them piled into the pub. Some of the stories that appeared in the Monday

papers were like comic strips and were certainly written under the influence of too much drink. One or two stated that Major Cooper's country headquarters was manned by strong-arm men from the SAS – which was completely untrue. Lady Birdwood even stood accused of gun-running! Naturally enough I rang Jim Johnson, who said that he would get me out. He told me that he would send Fiona Fraser in a Mini to collect me, and that in the meanwhile I should stay in the pub. Early on the Tuesday morning, a little red Mini drove into the car park at the back and I slipped into it, avoiding the horde of reporters camped out at the front. We drove to the nearby village of Fyfield where clothes and other necessities for my return to the Yemen had been left for me. At the same time, my brother-in-law took my own car out from the house and drove off in the opposite direction pursued by the press convoy. From Fyfield, Fiona drove me straight to our London HQ and then to Heathrow to board the BOAC flight to Aden.

The Egyptian version of the story was that one of their helicopters with a mobile special patrol on board had intercepted a Yemeni caravan *en route* from the south, and had captured the letters. As all the letters had been written in January and February, however, the time lag between then and the date of publication indicated that they had probably been bartered through many hands before reaching Egyptian Intelligence. The truth will never be known.

I was relieved once more to return to the quiet life in the Yemeni mountains after the excitement of being chased around in my own country. Our time was mainly spent in receiving air drops and in improving our recovery techniques, but we also had supplies of food sent in which improved our diet. Usually the pilot would only say: 'Got your visual – dummy run – dropping now – goodbye,' but sometimes would add: 'The last container is personal for Abdullah bin Nasser,' my codename. When this occurred

we had to make certain that Bailey and Weavers got to the container first to hinder the Yemenis from pillaging our spoils. Our 'friends' would include English newspapers, various food items and the occasional bottle of Scotch.

By then the Royalist Fifth Army, commanded by Abdullah bin Hassan, and supported by Sheikh Nagi Al Rada, had been sufficiently rearmed to mount a major offensive. The aim was to isolate the Egyptian garrison in the capital Sa'ana, which lay below us in the plains. There were only two real routes into the city: one from the port of Hodaida through which virtually all the Egyptian supplies were brought in, and the second which connected with the twin capital city of Taiz. All that had to be done was to cut those two roads, south and west of Sa'ana. Prince Abdullah asked us for help in planning, and David Bailey was attached to the party detailed to cut the road to Taiz. Weavers stayed with me to pass on the information which we were transmitting regularly to Aden. The operation was successful and for almost five weeks the only supplies reaching Sa'ana had to be airlifted. To counteract those Royalist moves, the Egyptians threw the bulk of their air power into attacking all the surrounding villages, hoping to scare the tribesmen away from supporting Abdullah. There was, however, occasional light relief. One afternoon, at the height of the battle, the Egyptians bought over the entire Bani Sanhan tribe with bags of gold. But at midnight, Prince Abdullah informed me, with a merry smile on his face, that he had bought them back, together with all the weapons that the Egyptians had given them when they deserted.

At the same time as our operations were taking place, Prince Mohammed Hussein was encircling the Egyptian forces in the north-eastern part of the country. The two offensives did much towards convincing the occupiers that the only way to end the war was through a negotiated settlement. A meeting was convened at the small town of Harad, close to the Saudi frontier. In the mountains

behind was the main base of the Royalist leader, the Imam al Badr. David Bailey and I were instructed to return to Aden and from there to move up to the Saudi port of Jeddah on the Red Sea, preparatory to joining up with the Imam. We moved out in a caravan and the journey proved to be quite uneventful. On arrival in Jeddah we were issued with a Land Rover, radios and supplies. I also had a meeting with the chief of Saudi Intelligence, General Kemel Atam al Turki, in his huge headquarters. He briefed me on Saudi dispositions in the south and expressed his fears about the Egyptian presence so near their oilfields. They not only had the bulk of their regular army near the Yemen border, but had also mobilized the tribal 'White Army', which was fanatically loyal to the King. Kemel Atam also asked for a complete report on our activities over the previous two years, and seemed well satisfied with all our exploits. This was all to the good, as it was his department that had paid for us.

A few days later, David Bailey and I started out on our long journey down to the Yemen frontier, a trip of some four hundred miles. This took us along the Mecca pilgrimage route in reverse direction, and as the going was extremely soft, we took four days. In Jezan we met the governor, Ali bin Zudairi, a member of a large family tribe loyal to the King. Looking out from his office, he pointed out the border where the North Yemen mountains rose almost vertically out of the plain, to reach 5,000 feet. He said that we should leave our vehicle with him in exchange for donkeys to carry us on the trek to the headquarters of the Imam. This was situated in a number of caves and houses hidden in the most inaccessible place imaginable. Our job was to receive an air drop and then to move south to the ancient religious capital of Hajjah, which was surrounded by Royalist forces. There we were to help the local commander plan a final attack if the peace talks at Harad failed to produce a settlement.

Our climb to the Imam's eyrie was slow and uneventful

until we reached a point about 4,000 feet above sea level. Looking back across the Saudi Arabian plains the view became increasingly magnificent. We were ascending at a rate of about 1,500 feet per hour, and as the mules with our equipment followed up behind, we were only encumbered with our medical packs. Arriving at a small settlement, we discovered that news of us had gone on ahead, especially about our medical prowess. Spread across the track were half a dozen people asking for help. Naturally enough we stopped and dispensed the usual pills, injections and dressings. The whole village turned out to watch and overwhelmed us with their hospitality, with gifts of coffee, dates, bread, and even boxes of Turkish Delight. We stayed for more than an hour and a half, until we were forced to continue our climb as night was drawing near. In fact, we managed to reach the forward security zone before bedding down.

The following morning we carried on to the Imam's headquarters and were met by many of his staff and field commanders, before being ushered into his presence. He turned out to be a man in his late forties or early fifties, tall and well-built for a Yemeni, and with a most infectious smile. During his welcoming speech we were once more inundated with coffee and goodies. He had prepared a separate stone-built house for us, and requested all the news about the Fifth Army. He also asked especially about Prince Abdullah and Prince Hussein. Then we were informed that Wilfred Thesiger was at the foot of the mountains and would be arriving the following day. He had been with us in L Detachment in 1942 and since then had crossed the Empty Quarter, had written the book *Arabian Sands* and another about the Iraqi Marsh Arabs. He had arrived to study the many Zaidi and Shaffi dialects. Oddly enough, this was not to be my last encounter with him, because we met again in Salalah in the Dhofar Province of Oman in 1977.

When Wilfred arrived in camp, he complained bitterly about the fact that the Imam had sent mules for him.

He said to me: 'Gentlemen do not ride on mules, or for that matter, in aircraft and automobiles.' We reminisced about our days in the desert in 1942 and I told him about my forthcoming expedition down to Hajjah. We were to leave as soon as camels and guides were made available. It was to be a long march down the spine of North Yemen, a total of about a hundred and fifty miles following the contours of the peaks, some of which were over 12,000 feet.

Two days later, David and I departed for Hajjah with a small escort party and three camels to carry the majority of our equipment and radios. We were to be down there for quite some time. The actual march itself was a magnificent experience, as we constantly had to ascend and then descend again into the valleys of the rivers which flowed from the mountains into the Red Sea. Three days later we arrived at the Muslim religious centre of Hajjah with its ancient mosque, the most important one in the whole country. Looking down from our vantage point, we could see the Egyptian armoured cars and tanks which had taken position near the mosque itself, knowing full well that the Royalists would never shell it for fear of causing damage. Until the Egyptians withdrew from the city some months later, they never moved their positions more than a few hundred yards from the shrine.

It was quite obvious that the grapevine had given Egyptian Intelligence news of our arrival in the area. Their Air Force actually took the unprecedented step of trying to liquidate us in the small village above the city where we had installed ourselves. One morning, three days after our arrival, we were surprised to see two huge Russian Tupolev bombers circling above. We were even more astonished when their bomb doors opened and enormous 10,000 lb bombs came tumbling out. They hurtled earthwards turning end over end until they crashed with shattering explosions – at least five miles off target. After dropping their loads, both bombers circled around, and we were informed later that it was rumoured

that Nasser himself had been in one of them. Certainly they had flown in direct from Egypt as there were no runways in the Yemen capable of taking them. We were so interested in seeing the effects of the explosions that we trekked across to where one of the bombs had landed. We were amazed at the vast craters, which had done no damage whatsoever, and which in later weeks, when the rains came, made ideal water holes for the locals.

We radioed the information back to Aden and to the Saudis about this classic example of taking a sledge-hammer to crack a walnut. It caused much amusement that David and I should be singled out for the attentions of two strategic bombers. If, however, one of those bombs had landed within five hundred yards of us, I doubt if we would have lived to tell the tale.

As the Harad conference got underway, the aerial war intensified. Our main adversaries were not the Egyptian jets, but rather their Yaks, which were single-engine propeller-driven aircraft similar to the World War II Hurricanes and Spitfires. These were highly manoeuvrable and were armed both with cannon and rockets. It was most unpleasant to be caught out in the open by one of those bees with a lethal sting, and one was encouraged to dive into the nearest cave or funk hole until it had disappeared. Life during those blitzes necessitated leaving the villages before dawn and holing up at least two miles away from any buildings, which always seemed to be the targets of the Ilyushin 28 fighter-bombers. Strangely enough the Egyptian Air Force did not use helicopter gunships, and their choppers habitually flew over our positions at a great height. Whether their pilots credited the Royalist machine-gunners with better equipment or thought that we had ground-to-air missiles, I never found out. Nearly all the surrounded Egyptian garrisons were supplied by helicopters, but these approached in a spiral descent pattern protected by their own ground troops. Very few road convoys were getting into Hajjah and the Egyptians hugged their positions around the mosque.

Eventually we received information that the Harad conference was in full swing, and that a sort of ceasefire was in operation in many areas, and it was agreed that the Imam al Badr was to go into exile in Saudi Arabia, which brought our role to an end in the early months of 1966. This was really my last SAS type operation. On returning to the UK, I was contacted by Brigadier Waterfield, the military secretary to the Sultan of Muscat and Oman, who told me that I had been 'pardoned' for overstaying my original grant of one month's leave! He asked me to return to take up the post of second-in-command of the Muscat Regiment which was then led by Trevor Alexander. The regiment was stationed in the southern province of Dhofar, where it was involved in fighting what was to develop into an eight-year war against communist insurgents from South Yemen. Before I returned to my duties in the Gulf, however, I had a full medical check-up at the School of Tropical Medicine. To my astonishment I was told that I had contracted tuberculosis in both lungs. This put me into hospital and under treatment for three months. Fortunately, as I was a non-smoker, I was completely cured after two years of treatment.

Postscript

Now in 1989, looking back to those years between 1941 and 1960 and my close association with the Special Air Service Regiment, I consider it to have been more of a club or a family, with no great emphasis on the physical toughness that is so often attributed to it today.

We were carrying out David Stirling's initial insistence that small patrols of no more than three men could inflict enormous damage on an enemy owing to their ability to penetrate silently behind the lines. We certainly proved that in those early days. This was coupled naturally to the ability to change our operational methods to reflect changing circumstances and enemy response. It was this flexibility which David Stirling insisted upon that kept us one step ahead of the Afrika Korps. Ever since, those same basic principles have kept the enemy guessing in operations in Europe, Malaya, Oman, Borneo, the Falklands, and today in the counter-terrorist role in Northern Ireland and elsewhere; and, most recently, in the Gulf.

The surviving Originals

Reg Seekings
Jimmy Storie
Jim Almonds
Jimmy Brough
Ernie Bond
Bob Bennett
Frank Rhodes
Pat Riley
Humphrey Evans
Taffy Leadbetter
Tubby Trenfield
John Byrne
John Cooper

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